SAGA OF OLD CITY

GREYHAWK™ ADVENTURES

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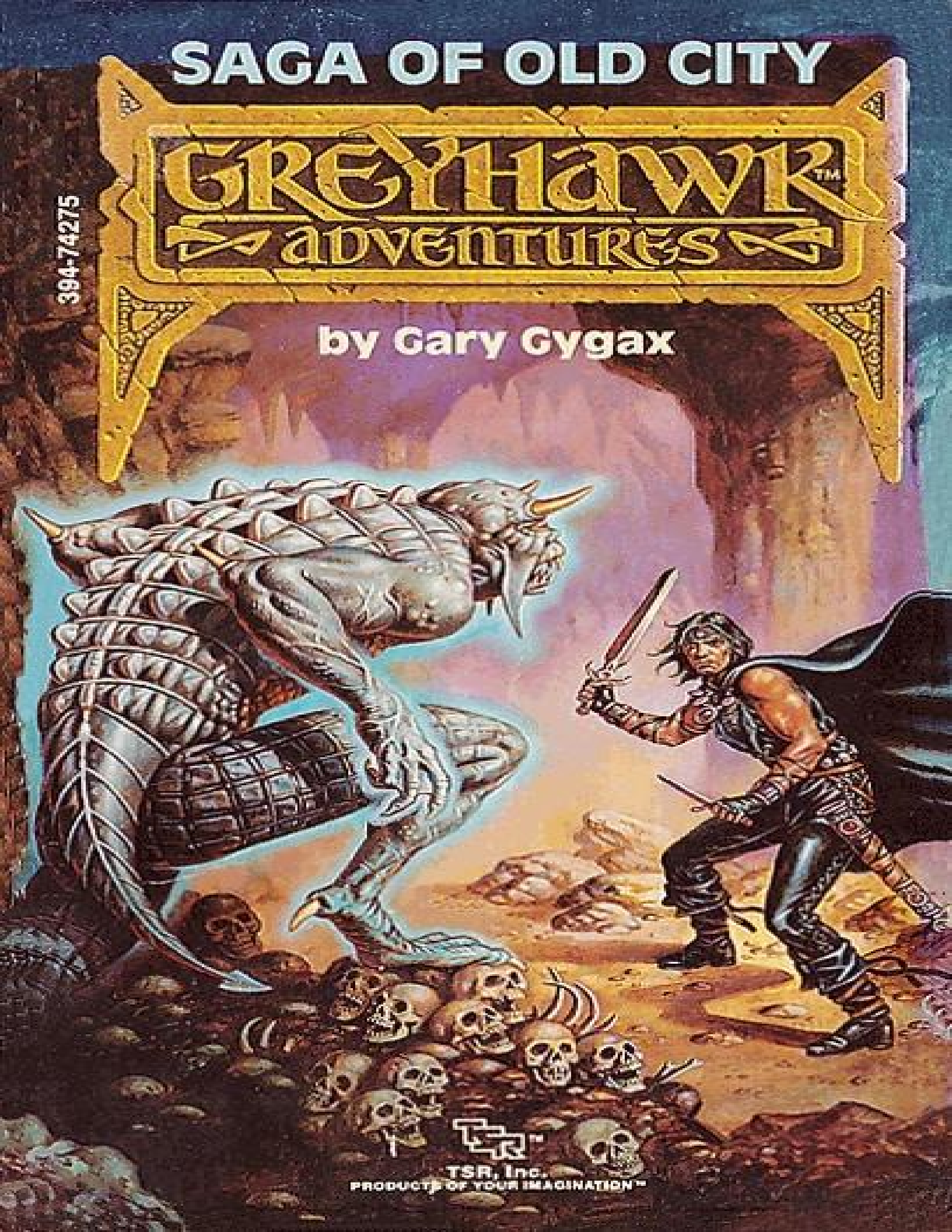
by Gary Gygax



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Saga of Old City
Greyhawk Adventures Book 1
Gary Gygax

This book is lovingly dedicated to Gail Carpenter, who gave me a multitude of reasons to want to write it.

Chapter 1

The big, blackish rat sat upon the feast as a king upon his throne. Gord eyed the scene hungrily, his mouth watering at the sight of the trencher. Some incredibly wasteful person had discarded a slab of bread, soaked in rich meat juices and imbedded with succulent bits of things. It lay atop the garbage heap in the alleyway, and the rat sat peremptorily upon it. Gord stood nearby in jittery indecision—encouraged by hunger, restrained by fear. Then he decided to act. With a rapid motion he scooped up a pebble and flung it at the rodent. It struck the rat on its flank, but the creature didn't run off as Gord had hoped. Instead, the rat bared its teeth viciously, voiced a horrid chittering noise, and advanced menacingly in Gord's direction. With a frightened shriek, Gord leapt back, turned, and fled. Such a threat easily overcame the gnawing feeling in his stomach.

"Shiteater!" Gord screamed over his shoulder as he fled the huge rodent.

"Useless," he thought to himself as he slowed and sought a meal elsewhere. "I am too small, too weak." How often had this lesson been drummed into him?

Even as that thought came to mind, his brain fought to dismiss it, because the memories were too painful. Leena, the old scavenger woman who fostered him, had cuffed him and beat him at will—especially if he tried to hold out a scrap of food from her. Although Gord was quick and clever, he was small. He thought of himself as a runt, a coward, a failure. Now even a rat had made him run away, and Gord felt mean and miserable. He had to do something, anything; otherwise there was no reason to go on struggling to stay alive day to day.

Gord began running again, as if to escape from himself. "You'll see! I'll show you all! You'll… see…" he chanted as he pounded through the narrow, dirty byways that were his home.

The twistings and turnings of the alleys and gangways of Greyhawk's Slum Quarter were such that anyone not intimately familiar with them would be lost in minutes. Even the thieves avoided its crumbling ruins and decrepit shacks. Beggars, crazy men, and the desperate were the elite of its inhabitants. Gord, a short and skinny orphan, had spent all of his dozen years within this warren. Somehow he had managed to stay alive, thanks to his quickness, cleverness, and luck. Being called "Gord the Gutless" by the other urchins of the Slum Quarter didn't bother him… much. At least he had

managed to stay alive, unlike more of his fellow dwellers in this place than he cared to think about.

Gord slowed his pace abruptly, then stopped and huddled, gasping, under a partially collapsed wall of an ancient warehouse. He had been using various refuges of this sort, one after the other, for several months. Each gave him someplace to hide and be alone with his thoughts, and more recently, since he had been rid of Leena, served as his home for a while.

His panting subsided, but as his wind returned so did his hunger. The hollow ache of an empty stomach was nothing new to him. Even his earliest memories of Leena, the closest thing to a mother he had known, were linked with hunger. The main concern of all who lived within the decaying labyrinth of the Slum Quarter was getting food—each day enough to exist until the next.

Leena had died last winter. Many of the poor failed to survive that season, even though there were few really bitter days. The dampness and the weeks of nagging chill were sufficient to winnow out the weak. Gord had managed well enough without Leena since then, for he had actually been the provider for the last couple of years anyway. In fact, he had come to resent her whining and demands, her treating of him as something less than a son. Once, Leena had showed him a simple, unremarkable box, telling him that it had something to do with his natural parents. Then, with cruel glee, she took it outside and buried it deep in the ground near the shack they shared. "Best that this memory remain buried," she had cackled, and she never spoke about the box again.

When Gord returned one day from his scavenging and found Leena's stiffened corpse in the shack, his first and only thoughts were ones of relief: Now he could have the little scraps of food he found all for himself. After checking it carefully for any possible valuables, he had rolled Leena's body out of the shack and left it for the mongrel dogs to take care of. Then he gathered up what little of value he could find and carry, and left the shack—but not the memories of it—behind him for good. As he recalled that day, Gord thought of what he possessed. Moving a board low on the good wall of his shelter, he drew out a bundle wrapped in a ragged square of cloth—his winter cloak.

He thought more about his past as he held the small parcel. "You are too small!" Leena would shriek at him when Gord failed to bring back anything worth selling or eating. Then the old hag would cuff and kick him into a

huddled, blubbering ball of misery and… and hatred! Gord certainly did grow to hate his foster mother. Even at best, she was a despicable and wicked old crone.

"Clever Gord, sly Gord," she would croon as she ate most of some scrap he would bring back. Leena would even pat him on the head and tell him to be quick and nimble, for a good head was better than a strong body, she would say—until he failed. Then he was a useless runt!

Inside the parcel were all his worldly possessions aside from the clothing he wore. The first thing Gord took out was a tiny, dried apple, which he ate in a single bite. As he munched on the withered fruit, he surveyed the remainder of the treasure. There were two drabs—nearly worthless iron coins of least value, but all the money he had ever owned. He remembered finding them hidden in the hem of Leena's threadbare shawl. Beside them in the parcel was a small, chipped square of glass. Gord could use it to start a fire if the sun was brightly shining, and he thought it pretty besides. A longish coil of leather thong, a small, broken-tipped kitchen knife, and a cracked wooden box were all that remained. There was nothing more to eat, and nothing to sell. The two drabs wouldn't buy Gord enough food to get him past tomorrow, and carrying them on his person invited danger.

Shortly after Leena's death, a gang had invaded the area. They called themselves the Headsmen, because one of the bigger boys had discovered a large cleaver in one of the deserted shambles nearby. With this weapon, he had easily convinced the others to accept his leadership. These dozen hoodlums quickly established their own territory, even killing a crazy hermit who contested their domain. The gang members were all a bit older than Gord, bigger than he, and much more aggressive. They promptly proceeded to deliberately make life even more miserable for Gord. Not only did he have to find food or steal it, he then had to get it back to his place of refuge without one of the gang members stopping him and taking it away. They seemed to be everywhere, and no matter how careful Gord was, they had often caught him and stolen whatever he carried. Because there was no other area of the city where a homeless and friendless beggar-boy could go, Gord had accepted the new peril of the gang as yet another obstacle on the path of his hard and miserable life. Now, with Leena gone, Gord was able to devour anything he found, but that meant what he couldn't eat then and there must be left behind, or he risked having it and himself fall into the

clutches of the gang. There was no margin for Gord, no store of food against a leaner than usual day.

"No help for it," Gord thought. He had stayed long enough in this hiding place. Now it was time to set out again, and he had to risk carrying his valuables with him. He tucked the two coins in the fold of his ragged shirt, added the knife, and set out to see if something couldn't be salvaged out of the day.

Gord thought he had managed to sneak safely through the place of worst danger and was creeping along the front of a tenement, just a block away from the edge of the Headsmen's territory, when a hand darted out of a doorway and grabbed him.

"Well, well! If it ain't little Gord the Gutless! Where you sneakin' off to this time, wee mouse?"

Gord's heart sank as he looked from hand to arm to face. The broken-toothed grin that greeted his frightened gaze belonged to Snaggle. Full-grown and hulking, this stupid youth was the meanest of the gang members. As Gord tried to break away and run, Snaggle's hand closed tightly on the collar of Gord's shirt. While Gord hung helpless, his feet flailing several inches above the alley dirt, Snaggle frisked his person with his free hand.

"What the hell's this, Gutless?" The lout held up the small knife, looking at its dulled and broken edge. "Planning murder, huh?" Laughing at his own witticism, Snaggle cast the blade aside and continued his search of Gord's clothing. When his thick fingers found the two lumps that comprised Gord's entire fortune, they froze for a second; then they clutched and tore. Gord looked down as his captor opened his fist. The drabs and a piece of his shirt were revealed. Snaggle abruptly straightened his other arm, and Gord flew sprawling into the alley, stunned.

"Listen, you little shit," Snaggle said as he stepped to where his helpless victim lay, "holdin' out on the Headsmen ain't healthy!"

Gord, terrified, shut his eyes tight as Snaggle grabbed for him again. Then he felt himself being raised into the air, and he was sure the end had come. He felt the warmth of his own urine as his bladder, beyond his control, voided itself. The yellow trickle caught Snaggle's attention and, ironically, saved Gord from a worse fate.

"Aw, haw, haw! Pissed your pants 'cause of me!" Snaggle laughed with real pleasure at the thought, and dropped the small boy with disdain. "Gutless piss-pants ain't worth smashing anyway… too much fun to have

around." Still mirthful, Snaggle merely kicked Gord a couple of times, and not hard enough to break ribs at that. Gord lay still, too frightened to move.

"Listen, chicken-piss! I let you off easy this time. You made me laugh. Next time, I won't be so nice, so you better watch out! When I see you 'round here again, if you ain't got nothin' better than a broken toothpick and a pair o' drabs, I'll bust you up good—an' slow, too, so's all us guys can enjoy it. Now get your yella ass outta my face, 'cause I hate gutless little punks!"

Gord scrambled away on all fours, clambered to his feet, and ran as fast as he could. As he fled, Gord heard: "Make it a handful o' copper next time, piss-pants, and I'll make ya our jester! Haw, haw, haw!"

Gord's face was flushed with shame—a hot tingling that washed away the feeling, but not the memory, of the chill, pale fear he had just experienced. In the back of his mind Gord heard Leena cackling and screeching at him in her hag's voice: "Gutless little runt, you ain't even any use to yerself!"

It was true, for now he had nothing, no one. There was no place for him to go, nowhere to hide. His mind darted here and there, skittering from thought to thought like a mouse trapped in a box. The voice in his head kept cackling and berating him, though, underlying his frenzy, and this kept Gord from totally giving way to panic and despair. He was weak and lacked courage, but there was hatred to drive him!

What had just happened was too much for even Gord to pass off as merely another episode in a rotten life. Gutless or not, he had some bit of pride remaining. Somehow, Gord had to restore himself in his own eyes and settle with Snaggle in the process.

Fully returning to reality, Gord looked around and got his bearings. He was at the edge of the worst part of the Slum Quarter, near the better sector where menial laborers and others of that ilk lived. This was unsafe territory for an urchin; these working people didn't want Gord's kind around, knowing that they were there only to steal what little these poor folk possessed. He turned to retrace his steps and then stopped: At this point, he had nothing more to lose.

Gord slid into the shallow space of a boarded-up doorway and scrutinized the area, not knowing what he was looking for but willing to settle for anything promising. The narrow alley he was in gave onto a wider lane just ahead. He saw occasional figures passing the mouth of the passage. Anything else? Glancing up, Gord saw a series of moving shadows. It took

only a moment or two for him to figure out that someone had a line of washing hung out to dry on the rooftop across the way.

"Now here's a stroke of real luck," he thought, as he ascended the gap by pressing his feet against one wall and his back and palms against the other.

A few minutes later, a shabbily dressed boy entered Killcat Lane from a disused alley. From the look of him he could have been one of dozens of lads who traveled in this vicinity, a link-boy or bound-boy of some sort on an errand for master or mistress—perhaps even the son of a local resident. A closer look might have brought a question to the observer's mind, however. Although the worn blouse and baggy trousers were clean, the wearer most certainly was not. And where were the lad's sandals?

Aware that his disguise was not perfect, Gord was feeling confident nonetheless. He had managed to steal a set of clothes better than any he had ever worn before. Although there had been nothing on the laundry line worth taking for sale somewhere, at least he could now move freely through this part of the quarter to the Foreign Quarter nearby. This opened up a whole realm of possibilities to him, and Gord's mind raced over the more exciting ones. An unattended cash box would make him rich enough to live comfortably for months—and enable him to afford a ruffian to assassinate Snaggle. Perhaps he'd manage to find a jeweled weapon, a dagger or a small sword, left unguarded for a moment. After a grab and a fast getaway into the Slum Quarter's byways, Gord figured he would be on easy street for life—and he would hire a personal attendant to dispatch all of the miserable Headsmen. The visions indeed were dancing deliciously in Gord's mind as he skipped into the heart of that portion of Old Greyhawk City set aside for strangers.

At the Petit Bazaar, near the Black Gate, Gord came out of his wishful reverie and back into the real world. The worn cobbles of the rectangular plaza were crowded with colorfully draped and awninged booths, and rickety wagons and carts from which produce and handmade goods were hucked. The stone and brick buildings that walled the Petit Bazaar made the din of pedlars' shouts and craftsmens' calls, mixed with bargaining and insults yelled at the top of customers' voices, fairly dizzy his head. Worse still, the sight of so many good things to eat—the aroma of broiling meat, bubbling soup, freshly baked bread, ripe galda fruit—caused Gord's stomach to contract in waves of hunger. What should he do? Steal

something to eat? Starvation was only a step behind—as always! Gord paused for a moment, invisible in an eddy where a buttress diverted the stream of human traffic elsewhere, a small, insignificant boy who was of no interest to anyone.

The place was thronged with the usual motley array of beings. Mixed with the typical city dwellers were all forms of outlanders—farmers and serfs from the surrounding area, dark and swarthy Rhennee bargefolk, half-orcs, unemployed mercenaries from Hardby and the Wild Coast, merchants and teamsters from all parts, and demi-humans from who knew where. Gord slipped into the wake of a group of tallfellows a half-score strong. The halflings were intent on some business and didn't notice Gord at all. In turn, others around might easily mistake him for one of their number. Thus camouflaged, Gord worked his way along with the group, past the cheap goods to where the valuable merchandise was offered. As the party of small folk passed close to a booth offering silver jewelry, Gord could restrain himself no longer. The opportunity was there, and he acted partly out of instinct and partly out of desperation. A dart of the hand, and a beautifully wrought piece of armware was missing from the counter and safely within Gord's blouse. It was easy! No hue and cry went up, so Gord continued to pace the tallfellows until they reached a place where a side alley wandered away from the market square. Just as they passed this place of safety, Gord spun left and made his dash.

He ran squarely into the arms of a large, mail-clad Officer of the Watch.

Chapter 2

Justice was swift, punishment sure to follow. The bailiff stared down at the small figure held firmly before him by a brawny man-at-arms. The dirty, narrow face showed a mixture of fear and defiance. However, the body's posture was one of hopelessness. The bailiff could tell that the scrawny little guttersnipe knew he was guilty.

"Gord, dweller in the Slum Quarter of the Old City, I find you guilty of grand theft. You are fortunate indeed that the goods were recovered, for otherwise you would suffer flogging and then the axe… or worse. Lucky too, thief, that this is your first time caught, else I'd see your hand forfeit. Low justice prescribes your fate: I sentence you to three years in the workhouse in penal servitude," the bailiff concluded, pointing his ceremonial mace at Gord. "Take the scum away!"

Shaking his head in disgusted bewilderment over how such creatures could be allowed to survive for a dozen years, the bailiff prepared himself for the next case.

Gord wasn't surprised at being punished, nor was he particularly upset by the official's harsh words. In fact, he was pleased at the result.

"Luck!" Gord thought. "I'm lucky for once!" For stealing as he had, Gord could have lost a hand. But the bailiff had ruled that all he had to do was work for a bit—and he'd be fed for it! Somehow, Gord reasoned, the powers above had seen him as fit and useful for something—no matter that his lot was to be a convicted criminal and workhouse slave. Gord was jubilant at the thought of being seen worthy of something, even penal servitude.

"With something in my belly, I'll show them," Gord thought. If only it had been as easy as that….

The workhouse was grim. It was a prison converted from its original use as a guard barracks, back when the city was smaller. It was centuries old; damp and must permeated the place, as did the stink of unwashed bodies. Lice and vermin thrived inside its walls, but prisoners did not. Sunlight scarcely entered so foul a structure—and if the prisoners were the dregs of Greyhawk, then the guards, to judge by their demeanor, were worse still. Fortunately for Gord, inmates were sorted by size and strength so as to assign suitable work to each group. Had he been thrown in with the larger and stronger prisoners, he wouldn't have survived the bullying, sodomizing, and worse. As it was, put in a group of prisoners more or less his peers,

Gord imagined that the denizens of the hells could learn a lesson from this place. He and his fellow sufferers were roused every morning at first light, given dirty water and a moldy crust of bread, then put to some back-breaking or painful task such as clearing narrow sewer drains or scrubbing acid vats. At least there was a brief march to the work area, which provided a short dose of sunlight and fresh air. The crew was worked for six hours, then given a half-hour to consume their main meal of the day—porridge or gruel containing rancid fat and bits of fortunately unidentifiable things.

At dusk, all outside labor ended. Groups from various parts of the city were quick-marched back to the workhouse and re-deposited in their respective common cells. If they cleaned these places up properly, they would then receive watery broth and a bit of weevil-ridden bread for supper. If even one member of a group of cellmates made any trouble, all went hungry. A troublemaker didn't live long unless he was the biggest and strongest in the lot. Even then, the guards soon saw to it that his work and discipline wore him down, and the inmates themselves did the rest, until the malcontent was eventually carried out one morning with the night-soil buckets.

Nights were the worst time of all. There was little light in the small, damp cells even when the sun was high. As darkness fell, the place became a lightless hell. Shrieks and cries echoed through the corridors, mingled with insane laughter and the groans of the sick and dying. There were activities going on in other places within the workhouse, things that Gord had heard of but didn't want to think about, and he was glad enough to be in even so small a place, a cell for some of the weakest and most harmless residents.

He found a small space for himself, scraped together a bit of moldering, stinking straw for a bed, and stayed there whenever he could. Gord kept to himself and spoke to nobody unless he had to. The vermin were hungry and aggressive, but they were an inconvenience, not a threat. Rats and huge centipedes were another thing altogether. He learned to sleep very lightly and to jump up, fully awake, at the slightest rustling. Each new prisoner quickly learned to make himself a small weapon to employ against attacks by rats or centipedes. Gord had a sharply pointed stick about a foot long. This weapon kept him safe, even though he could not usually kill anything with it, for any wounded predator was promptly attacked and devoured by the other scavengers—or sometimes by the occupants of the cell!

After a few days of imprisonment, Gord had completely overcome his initial shock and horror, and he began to think: If actual escape was not possible, then how could he better his condition? The others confined with him were a mixed bag indeed. Old women, children, even an ancient gnome seemingly near death. In the time he had been in the workhouse, only one sickly boy had died in the cell, and some stringy-haired girl had been incautious and was killed by a fall into an acid vat. That wasn't exactly encouraging to Gord, no matter how he turned it over in his mind. Gord wasn't robust, and who knew when fatigue would make him careless? Something had to be done, fast!

He considered his world—fellow prisoners, the cell room, the guard. Only one prospect seemed to offer any possibility. If he could somehow be assigned to a still weaker group, the one composed of the nearly feeble and the maimed, then he thought his work would be lighter and certainly not dangerous. Gord had seen the line of shuffling, hopping, crutch-supported workers from the floor beneath his cell being led to and from a workroom within the prison itself. This idea offered promise!

Gord did not seriously consider maiming himself to get into the group, but his aversion to pain and infirmity was not the main reason. He had heard that self-inflicted disability brought a whipping and consignment to a dungeon cell for the condemned, where neither food nor water were to be had. Supposedly, the rat-gnawed bones of the former tenant were removed by the newcomer as part of the final lesson to be learned. Gord shuddered at the thought of slow death by thirst and starvation, while rats nibbled off toes and fingers. So, injury was out. Likewise, weakness couldn't be feigned, and neither could age. That left only sickness. But in the workhouse there was no care for the ill—no cleric, no physician, no medicine, nothing. Prisoners either got better or died. Those unable to work were not fed, although a companion might share water and a morsel of food—a stupid thing to do, thought Gord, for it only increased the benefactor's chance of being the next to go.

To be safe he had to be sick in a special way—still able to work, but so sick as to be unable to do anything but the least strenuous sort of labor. He thought for a while longer, and then Gord had his plan.

The turnkey came at dawn as usual, heralded by the sound of his huge iron key grating in the massive lock, while the waiting guard thumped his

truncheon against the oaken door. Everyone would be awake when the portal swung open and food was doled out. A large man carried the water butt, while a crone parceled out the bread from the sack she toted. Nobody noticed Gord, the last in line, until he came near the trustees. The old woman lurched back with a shriek, and the water-bearer looked pale at the sight of the boy. Gord's eyes were red-rimmed and watering. He sniveled and wiped absently at the mucus dripping from his nose. His face, body, and extremities were marked by scabby sores.

"The little bugger's got the plague!" the hag screeched.

"Keep 'im away from me!"

The turnkey and the guard looked at Gord, who smiled weakly at them, shrugging, then looked at each other. Yarm, the turnkey, scratched his head and offered a diagnosis. "It do look kinda like bloodpox, Clyde, but he ain't wobblin' an' twitchin' like they do." He scratched his head again, knocking his steel cap awry.

"C'mere, boy!" commanded Clyde, the guard. He watched Gord approach hesitantly. Gord was careful not to wobble or twitch, because bloodpox was a serious malady indeed—too serious for his purpose. He advanced slowly to within a couple of paces of the men. Without touching him, both guard and turnkey looked closely at him. Now, Yarm was stumped.

"Sure as shit it's sumpin," he ventured, "but I'd say it ain't bloodpox—"

Clyde cut off the turnkey's observation in mid-sentence, motioned Gord out of the cell, and pointed toward a niche in the corridor with an upended crate nestled in it.

"Sit there, and don't move, else I'll club you!" said Clyde, and then he gave his attention to getting the miserable lot of prisoners lined up and ready for coffling into the morning work party. In a minute or two a pair of guards carrying a set of chain and leg irons appeared from around the corner. They snapped the restraints in place on the prisoners as Clyde informed them that "the little punk," as he called Gord, would be going with him. The other guards hustled their charges down the corridor and around the corner. In the meantime Yarm had moved on, as had the crone and the water-bearer. Gord and the guard were alone.

Although he had not moved his body, Gord had watched every move that Clyde made. Did anything in his bearing hint that he suspected Gord's deception? It hadn't been easy to make himself look sick. Finding a mold that caused his eyes and nose to be irritated and runny was not too hard, but

the sores had been another thing altogether. His head had ached with concentration and he had nearly given up in despair before the idea of bedbugs struck him. Gord had had to spend half the night carefully feeling around for them and placing them in the desired locations on his face and body. Their bites didn't hurt much, but he had to fight to keep from crying out in pain when he rubbed the irritating mold-stuff into the wounds the vermin had left. Gord had hoped that the trick would work, but he hadn't suspected that the ruse would be so effective as to resemble bloodpox! Few survived that disease without clerical attention.

Gord had a feeling that the guard had not paid any attention to the turnkey's opinion that the disease was not bloodpox—yet, at the same time, he was puzzled by the guard's lack of concern about possibly being exposed to that terrible disease. All the others in the vicinity had hurried away as quickly as possible, murmuring prayers to whatever deity they adhered to. Gord's thoughts turned from excitement to apprehension; he was now really afraid that he had gone too far. If they thought he actually had anything like bloodpox, he'd be killed and his body burned. No argument, no reprieve. The end. If he admitted to his deception, then the end would come just as certainly, but more slowly: Starvation in the dungeon would be his fate.

Clyde took a seat on a bench nearby and began scratching with a quill on a bit of parchment, only bothering to glance at Gord once in a while. Gord was amazed that the guard knew how to write. After several minutes of scratching and peering at the parchment, Clyde seemed satisfied with what he had on the scrap of material. He tucked it back in his jerkin and let out a shrill whistle. In a couple of moments another guard appeared from around the corner.

"What's up, Clyde?" the new fellow inquired.

"Mornin', Roak. Nuthin' much. Just need you to stand my station for an hour or two, whilst I take care of getting shucked of this sickie."

"Zork!" cried the startled Roak as he got a good look at the huddled boy in the niche. "That bird gots bloodpox!"

"Naw," Clyde drawled reassuringly as he arose. "It looks a lot like bloodpox, but the little chump has a plague that's only catching if ya consorts with corpses—if ya get my meanin', Roak."

"No shit! That creep got that from messing with a stiff? Wow!" Shaking his head and looking at Gord with utter disgust, the fellow plopped down in

Clyde's spot. "Glad you have to take care of the slime-bucket. See you in a coupla hours or so, pal."

Clyde motioned for Gord to get up, throwing him a cruel wink that indicated he should be afraid of what was in store for him, and then gestured for him to head down the corridor while he followed. "I'd bash his brains in m'self, Roak," said Clyde over his shoulder as they moved away, "but that might infect my club. I'll just leave it up to—" and by then they were out of the short corridor and heading down a set of stairs, and Clyde didn't bother to finish the sentence.

Gord thought about trying to run away, but there was no way he could have succeeded. In spite of himself, he began to quiver with fear. His eyes darted from side to side, and he even began to take small steps away from the guard. Clyde saw that his charge was near complete panic, so he muttered softly: "Stop it, you stupid punk! In a minute you're gonna blow the whole thing for both of us!"

Now Gord was more puzzled still, but the utter fear that had been washing over him subsided enough for him to remain in control of it. Soon they were at the front gate of the prison. Clyde handed over the document he had scratched out moments earlier, and the sentries passed them through without word or question. Gord could scarcely believe what was happening! In a few minutes the workhouse was lost from sight as they walked briskly into the Thieves Quarter.

Gord tried to find out what was happening and where they were going. His first set of questions was ignored, and when he tried again a couple of minutes later he got a slap on the side of the head for his effort. Obviously, the guard was not going to tell him anything more, and from moment to moment Gord's confused emotions vacillated between optimism and apprehension. After a walk of some distance, they came to a stop in front of a huge, old, dilapidated building. And still the guard said nothing.

Chapter 3

The inside of the old building was a marvel of decayed, rococo splendor. Aside from the dilapidated, filthy anteroom, the whole place was furnished in grand but shabby style. It was the mansion of Theobald, king of rag-pickers, sovereign of scavengers, lord of… junk. No other term could describe the welter of ragged, tattered, damaged, and defaced articles that filled the place to overflowing. Amid this incredible collage sat a huge, fat man on what was possibly once the divan of some Baklunish potentate. The tattered fabric of the sofa seemed to complement the stained and worn-out finery of the gross man who rested upon its broken frame. For a moment, he listened while Clyde paid him proper homage and began to state the reason why he and Gord had invaded the man's domain. Then Theobald waved a great, pudgy-fingered hand, his cheap rings and gaudy bracelets flashing and jangling as he did so, and Clyde immediately fell silent.

"What qualifies this little gaol-louse for my consideration, Clyde-the-Sharper? How dare you bring such before me and demand payment in good silver!" The fat fellow virtually shouted the last few words, and the wattles of his neck were reddened by such exertion. "Take him back to your miserable workhouse, or have him tossed into the lime pits, it's all the same to me. I won't buy him!"

Clyde didn't seem too disturbed by the outburst. "Great Master," he said soothingly, "I don't dispute your needs, but I crave your pardon with respect to the analysis of this fine young chap's worth." The fat man snorted at that, but Clyde continued as if he hadn't heard. "He is an urchin from the worst part of the Slum Quarter, one clever enough to steal clothing and make it all the way into the heart of the Petit Bazaar. There he actually managed to make off with a finely wrought silver bracelet, pretending all the while to be part of an entourage of tallfellows. And had the Merchants' Cant not alerted the Watch, he'd likely have escaped, too!"

Merchants' Cant? Gord had never heard of that before! He knew that thieves had a secret language, as did certain others, but the merchants? This was stunning news indeed. Meanwhile, the amazing conversation continued:

"So you think that qualifies him to be an apprentice to the Beggarmaster? Bah! Perhaps you can peddle him to some lesser person, robbing the customer of his money in the process, but not to one so wise as I. Again I say, take the vermin away! Bronze would be too dear for the likes of him!"

Gord suddenly realized that Clyde and the obese monster seated on the couch were bargaining over his price! He was about to be sold into virtual slavery. He started to open his mouth to shout that he was a free citizen of Greyhawk, but the memory of the workhouse sprang unbidden to his mind. Gord shut his mouth again and remained quiet. Perhaps apprenticeship to this notorious creature was better than servitude or death in the prison workhouse…. Perhaps.

"Done, then," said Clyde, reaching out and slapping the palm of the Beggarmaster with his own open hand. "He's yours for only ten commons."

Muttering darkly, the Beggarmaster dug a bulging purse from the worn girdle of faded purple leather that somehow encompassed his vast girth. One at a time, caressing each, he counted out ten copper coins for the outstretched hand of the man before him. Clyde, more sure of himself now that he had coins in hand, grinned ruefully, shook his head, and said, "You've had me again, you miserable, fat bastard of a skinflint. This dirty waif will turn out to be your most profitable purchase yet, or I'm a half-orc."

The Beggarmaster eyed him coldly. "If you weren't of small use to me, Clyde, I'd have you killed for the sport of it. Get yourself and your money out of here, and don't come back for a long time, or I will overlook your usefulness." This was spoken slowly and softly, but the guard reacted with haste. His arrogance gone as quickly as it had come, Clyde left hurriedly, without formality or even a good-bye. It made Gord shiver to see the burly guard humbled so abruptly.

"Come here, boy." The voice sounded fat and soft like the man speaking, but the tone was similar to that which had sent Clyde flying off. Gord hastened to obey. And then…

Smack! The huge, fat hand of the Beggarmaster was not as soft as it looked. Gord was knocked off his feet by the open-handed swat to the side of his head. He saw bright flashes of light before his eyes, and his ears rang. When his head cleared he looked up and saw the man who was now his master staring at him without expression.

"Now you know exactly where you stand, boy. I paid hard copper for you, and you are now my property, as certain as you belonged to the workhouse—only the guards there are kinder than you will find me to be."

Gord couldn't help trembling even as he was trying, out of pride, to keep from showing his fear. He instinctively drew himself into a huddled heap on the floor, watching and waiting for a kick in the ribs or another slap across

the head. The fat man saw Gord's terror, and a faint smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Gord could not tear his eyes away from the blubbery lips, and he watched as the smile was transformed into a cruel leer.

"You understand, don't you, boy? You have escaped the cooking pot but now lie amidst the coals. But you might have a little promise at that. On your feet, boy, and tell me your name and all you know!"

Gord's session with his new master had been long and grueling. At the slightest faltering or hesitancy on his part, the gross monster had calmly struck him again. Gord soon realized that the Beggarmaster actually enjoyed hitting him and seeing him suffer as a result. When he understood this fully, Gord made no further effort to hide his fear or his pain, so as to keep the fat man in as good a humor as possible. But, at the same time, he was careful not to overdo the display, nor to allow sniveling and weeping to interfere with prompt and complete replies. After an hour or so, the Beggarmaster seemed to grow bored with the sport. By then, Gord had told him details of his whole existence. Surprisingly, the fat man had seemed to relish parts of it, especially the story of how he'd gotten rid of his foster mother's body and the episode when Gord had wet his pants in fear of Snaggle. The session was ended with a handclap that brought a one-eyed man scurrying into the main chamber of the weird "palace."

"This little rat is now your pupil, Furgo," said the fat man. "Send him to me if he needs correction. Otherwise, I wish never to see him again unless he becomes one of my money-earning operatives."

With the one bright eye that bulged out of his lean and leathery face, Furgo peered intently at Gord for a moment. Then he took him firmly by the shoulder and led him behind an arras, where a short passage led from the grand salon to a dozen rickety rooms that constituted the remainder of the first storey of the building. In one of these rooms his new instructor seated the boy on a stool while he looked him over closely.

"Not bad, not bad," Furgo chuckled as he examined Gord's bleary eyes, his runny nose, and the "pox sores" Gord had created for his escape from workhouse labor. "Pretty sharp for an untrained boy—and such a stupid-looking one at that!" he said as he steered Gord out of the seat and over to a flight of creaking steps that wound upward.

"Where are you taking me?" Gord asked the thin beggar timorously.

Furgo prodded the frightened boy with a finger, urging him up the steps. "Never mind, laddy-boy, never mind. You are Furgo's charge now. You just do as you're told, and you've nothing to fear—save my anger, or Master Theobald's…."

They proceeded to mount the stairs until they came to the top floor, several levels above the ground. The place consisted of one large, open area and a warren composed of many cubicles. Furgo led Gord to a cubicle in the middle of the maze and told him to remember its location. This was to be his home until he was told differently. Whenever he wasn't receiving instruction, he was to be in his cubicle. Failure meant punishment—or death, depending on the Beggarmaster's whim. The one-eyed man didn't have to explain to Gord that the outcome would most likely be nasty either way, given the propensities of the lord of this place. Gord merely nodded to convey his complete understanding.

Furgo then led him to the kitchen in the cellar. There the greasy cook, whom Furgo referred to as Batcrap, gave him some boiled vegetables and broth—not very tasty, but more nourishment than Gord had taken at one sitting in a long time. His gulping and slobbering over the mess made both Furgo and Batcrap laugh loudly. Both agreed that Gord was likely to do okay here if he was as quick to learn and obey as he was to wolf down the chow. That made Gord grin in agreement—whereupon Batcrap smacked him on the ear and chided him, in a gruff but pleasant tone, for insolence to his betters.

Emboldened by the good feeling in his belly and the comradely buffet, Gord asked: "Where's everybody? This huge mansion has plenty of room for lots more than us!"

"Us? So it's *us* now, is it, m'lad?" Furgo said with a mixture of humor and threat in his voice. Then he turned and spoke to his chum. "See that, Batcrap! That delicious swill you feed these worthless apprentices is too good fer 'em—gives 'em delusions."

Gord didn't know what to do or say at that point, so he shrunk into himself and tried to be invisible. Furgo noticed the effort, and apparently appreciated it.

"That's the ticket!" said the one-eyed beggar as he clipped the boy across the back of his head. "You keep practicing that, and you'll be a good addition to our group." Then recalling what Gord's original question was, Furgo grinned and told him: "There are dozens of others who stay in this…

mansion." At that word, he and Batcrap both guffawed at Gord's use of such a lofty word to describe the decaying place. "They'll be comin' in between dusk and dark, turnin' over their earnings, then gettin' fed and doin' their trainin' before sleep time. You'll meet 'em all soon enough—don't fret about that. Come on now, laddy-boy. This day is all over for you."

After being escorted back to his room and kicked in the rear by the departing Furgo, Gord lay down with a sigh upon the heap of dirty straw and old rags that was his pallet. Not bad at all, he thought. After all, he wasn't dead. There was no muscle-wrenching toil to be done now. His belly was full. The rags and straw were as good a bed as he'd ever known. He shut his eyes and, although it could not have been more than midafternoon at the latest, fell asleep instantly.

He dreamed of fat, bald ogres and trolls dressed as guards, but they didn't trouble his slumber at all. In his dreams, Gord was always able to break out of their grasp, steal what they had, and slip away.

Chapter 4

Pain was the only sensation that could penetrate his brain. It was at least a sign that he was alive, and Gord accepted it as such. How long he could hold his position he did net know, but he was determined not to admit defeat and to persevere until Furgo said he could stop. That there were several others undergoing the same torture was indeed consolation to Gord. Perhaps if one of them broke first, he would follow, but until then he was determined to endure.

What the youth was suffering was simply training. Training to be a contortionist, to be able to assume the guise of a maimed and hopeless cripple. Part of the education necessary to field a corps of beggars each so pitiful and pathetic that the hardest-hearted passerby would have ruth and drop a drab or two into one's bowl.

Each morning Gord began the day with exercises, calisthenics that kept his young body lean and supple. If he did well, he was then allowed to break his fast with the dozens of other apprentice and journeyman beggars quartered in the Beggarmaster's building. Failure to please meant no food, at best, but Gord preferred not to think about that. Following the meal came lessons in the secret sign of the beggars—a means of communication that was supposedly unknown to the uninitiated, an amalgam of the Thieves' Cant and the secret speech of the Merchants' Guild that had been perverted to the ends of the lowly Beggars' Union. Thereafter came more physical training and then mental disciplines once again—usually memory training and then lessons in assessing people. Gord was quick to learn, and the lessons gladdened his heart. The skills and knowledge he was gaining were tools that would enable him to break out of the prison of the Slum, the Old City, and become something far greater than a successful beggar, let alone a beggar's apprentice. The actual goal was a secret, one kept closely among the chosen of the Beggarmaster—and Gord had earned his way into that select group! As he fought with body and mind to keep the pain from getting the best of him, Gord began to silently recall what he had learned and experienced in days recently gone by….

Those who dwelt with the Beggarmaster were unlike other members of the Beggars' Union. The latter simply paid a tithe to the master in return for a select location and the promise of aid when in trouble. But those indentured to the Beggarmaster had to turn over every iron drab, bronze

zee, or food scrap they garnered. After two months of service, and general instruction inside Theobald's "mansion," Gord had been sent out with a group of other apprentices and journeymen under the watchful eyes of a pair of master beggars. Since he did well in his efforts to swell the Beggarmaster's coffers, he was allowed to go on more of these field trips, and he soon developed a well-deserved reputation as a good scavenger. Whether he went out in morning or evening, to New City or Old, Gord had managed to come back with more coins and food than any of the others. Of course, sometimes he had had to resort to theft when soulful pleading for alms had failed to net what he felt would be an acceptable take. Early in his "career," Gord had been beaten once for failure, and he vowed to himself that such would never happen again.

Continued success brought the reward of being initiated into the Beggarmaster's inner circle. Each initiate swore an oath never to reveal, on penalty of death, the secret of the circle. When Gord was accepted as a member, he learned that the master was dissatisfied with his alliance with the Thieves' Guild. The arrangement between the groups was simple: Each beggar kept his or her eyes open for any likely prospects, signaling a mark to a nearby thief or bringing back word about potential targets for burglary or robbery. In return, a thief always gave to a beggar he encountered on the street, and a successful escapade by a thief meant a tithe from the Thieves' Guild to the Beggars' Union. However, this tithe was only one-tenth of that portion of the take paid by the thieves to their guild. Thus, if one hundred silver nobles were lifted from someone's strongbox, the thief would pay the customary one-tenth share to the guild, and of these ten coins the Beggarmaster got one. This was insufficient—Master of Beggars Theobald would have it all!

His scheme was simple. The Beggarmaster had enlisted renegade thieves, promising to pay them handsomely for their services. These professionals then trained the most promising beggars in the arts and crafts of thievery. Now there existed a cadre of beggars who were as skilled at cutting purses, picking pockets, and filching valuables as any of the rogues roaming the city under the auspices of the Thieves' Guild. The original instructors had "disappeared" in the meantime, so now only those whom the Beggarmaster had in his palm knew the secret. It was whispered among the talented apprentices that someday they would be the leaders of a host of beggar-thieves who would vanquish the guild and make any surviving thieves

swear fealty to the Beggars' Union. For the time being, they must all bring in coins by the sackful so that assassins and mercenaries could be enlisted when the master decided the time had come….

"Rest!" Furgo shouted, and all of the apprentices but Gord collapsed on the floor, grimacing and gasping. With his reverie broken but his resolve intact, the youth slowly lowered his left leg from its position behind his back and brought his right arm as slowly down to his side, flexing both to restore full circulation, but without apparent effort or pain.

"You there on the floor!" said Furgo. "Observe Gord. He isn't whining or wheezing. That's how you should all be. On your feet for more exercise now! For a break, we'll practice on the blade-dummy later."

As they groaned quietly and darted hateful looks at Gord, the other boys and girls of the group arose and returned to training. Although all wore beggar's rags, each was clean beneath the garments. Gord hadn't liked the bathing at first, but it was not optional. At times they would be required to assume a role other than that of a crippled, maimed, or diseased beggar; looking dirty was easy, but pretending to be an honest citizen of standing was not. The light stretching and bending exercises were easy, compared to what they had been through before them, and they would help a lot when dealing with the test of the blade-dummy. The apprentices took to the calisthenics with vigor, for all feared what was coming and wanted to be as prepared as they could be.

The blade-dummy was one of many manikins used for training. The simplest was just a dummy for beginners' practice. A different one was mounted on a pedestal and slowly turned, to make it difficult to approach. Yet another was covered with bells so that the slightest miscue by a would-be pickpocket caused a jingling.

The blade-dummy was the worst. Its robe, girdle, and tunic pockets were lined with razor-like blades positioned differently each time the thing was set up. As an instructor counted, each trainee had to take a turn at testing sleeve, breast, pocket and—worst of all—the purse tucked into the girdle. While a slip in some other area would inflict a painful cut, the purse was a double challenge. To get it free without encountering the blades surrounding it was difficult, and if it was removed too hastily, with too much force, or clumsily, then a spring blade from the girdle would scythe upward. A hand slowly pulled away would be gashed—or even severed, if

its owner was too hesitant. All of the apprentices were too quick to be seriously hurt, so long as they were careful, but it was hard to be confident about the blade-dummy, and the strain was terrible.

Eventually that exercise ended, and this time there was no blood shed at all—the students were indeed getting better. The subsequent practicing of stealthy movement, concealment, and lock-picking was just easy routine. Lessons in assessing the valuables of an individual, what was carried and where, how to observe a place for future burglary, and so forth filled the remainder of the long afternoon. Furgo was a hard taskmaster, and other experts who occasionally took their turns at instruction were just as demanding. After supper was time for letters—learning to write, spell, read, change hands to write with the other, and draw, and the seemingly endless copying of plans, maps, documents, and books.

Even more than he enjoyed all of this in-house learning, Gord liked the two market days, for then the apprentices were sent forth to put into action the skills they had learned. Tomorrow was a field day, and anticipation of the jaunt was uppermost in the minds of all the apprentices as they bade each other good-night at the end of the evening's lessons.

"What's the big deal about t'morrow?" asked Hoddy, a tiny fellow of only seven or eight years of age, as he dogged Gord's heels while they ascended the stairway. The youngster was a newcomer and had not yet been on an excursion outside the master's walls.

Gord looked wise and winked at the little waif. "Don't you worry none about it, laddy-boy…. It's soon enough you'll be learning."

Hoddy didn't know whether to grin or not at such words, as close as they were to those he heard continually from Master Furgo. He started to ask more, but Gord waved him off, and Hoddy shuffled discontentedly to his own place above.

Gord liked the little fellow, and that was saying a lot, for Gord had but two other such comrades in the whole place. Hoddy thought him big, strong, and smart. As far as Gord knew, that made Hoddy different from all the others in the Beggarmaster's decrepit "palace." Of course, Gord was often congratulated for his cunning, stealth, and even good thinking. But somehow, he didn't take such great pride in being praised for clever begging or thievery. Hoddy's adulation was for Gord as a person, not for anything in particular he did.

Soon the massive old structure was quiet. The practice rooms in the loft were empty. The two floors beneath were filled with sleeping beggars. The first floor, the offices of the Union, and the sprawling quarters of Master Theobald were silent too; the obese Beggarmaster was anxious that everyone be rested and alert so that all would go well on the morrow.

Before dawn the next morning, Gord and a score of other special apprentices were assembled. Each received instruction as to what he or she was to be that day. For this mission Gord was teamed with Violet, a beautiful young girl of about sixteen. She was a whore. Gord liked her, for she had been nice to him from the first. Violet was a top earner and a favorite of Theobald, and Gord didn't like to think about that. He supposed she had been put in the special group originally because the Beggarmaster liked her.

Gord was still naive at times. In reality, Violet was an accomplished actress and seasoned strumpet by the age of thirteen. Theobald simply knew talent, and that was why she was in the select group. She could pose as a pitiful young mother with a starving child, a vaguely pretty but crippled girl, an armless crone, or a striking doxy. Today she was the latter, posing as a courtesan from out of town—slumming, as it were, amid the merchants and artisans of the Garden Quarter's sporting district. She shot Gord a smile, and his heart raced. Gord was beginning to feel new stirrings within himself of late, especially when he was around Violet.

Dressed in ragged cloaks, the teams slipped out of the building separately. Each group went its own way quietly, disappearing quickly so as not to elicit unwanted attention. Gord and Violet made their way quickly to an empty building nearby, slipping in through a side door. A beggar there accepted their hand signs and took them into the next room, where he moved a table and lifted a concealed trap door. Gord helped the girl descend the ladderlike stairway.

At the bottom, some twenty or more feet beneath the streets above, was a secret passage that led under the wall dividing Old Town from New. There were gates to pass through, of course, but the cost was more than an iron drab for each pair of legs. Spies and watchers were at these places too, and the Beggarmaster wanted no reports of beggars moving to places where thievery would be reported later—thievery for which the guild took no responsibility or paid no share to city officials. Already the guild was getting pressure to account for such activity, and suspicion of the thieves

was rife. Neither could the new corps go in nonbeggar disguises, for obviously the whole scheme would come to light then. Thus, hidden ways and quick changes in secret stations were used to throw any observers off the track.

After a hundred or so paces, the pair came to a ladder. Violet ascended first, and Gord watched her from below, holding his candle so that he could view her shapely young legs. He began thinking of ways to be alone with her when they got back to their headquarters.

They changed in the room to which the ladder brought them. It was a small place hidden in the basement of the establishment of a pawnbroker. He was one of the Beggarmaster's trusted henchmen and made a fat profit from the goods he fenced for the burgeoning group of nonguild thieves. Violet's change was easy; she simply removed her cloak, revealing a fancy dress underneath, then took off her headwrap and shook out her hair. The soft, wavy, golden-brown tresses shone in the candlelight. Then she pulled several small items from the pockets of her cloak. An old, cracked mirror enabled her to apply pigments to darken her eyes and rouge her cheeks. Next came jewelry—fake stuff, naturally, but only an expert looking closely could tell that it was worth only coppers, not silver nobles.

In the meantime, Gord had shed his dirty garments and donned hose, pantaloons, doublet, and short cape. He was the serving boy of the courtesan Penora, lately of Dyvers, but now considering making her home in the more cosmopolitan City of Greyhawk. In his role, Gord wouldn't be noticed, for Violet-Penora would certainly command all eyes. His mission was to pick as many pockets and sneak as many purses and other valuables as he could.

"This will be fun!" thought Gord. Then he remembered that Violet would also be plying her original profession, and the day seemed less appealing than it had. But… no matter. One had to work to survive, and this was work he enjoyed.

Exiting the basement from a back door and melting into the throng on the street was a simple matter for them; both knew how to avoid attention when they wanted to. Once past Odd Alley, they walked west to The Processional and then turned north. Gord was excited at actually mingling as an equal with the folk who strolled along here. This was the major north-south artery of the city. Southward it led to the Grand Square and the Citadel. They were going the opposite direction toward the Garden Quarter. In a short time they

left the broad thoroughfare in favor of the narrower streets where the rich and famous commoners of the city dwelled. Blue Boar Street was renowned for its shops, its drinking and eating establishments, and the quality of the gentlefolk and rakes who frequented its curving length.

Pausing here and browsing there, they proceeded along as would a well-heeled woman of high station accompanied by her servant. Before they entered the Wizard's Hat Inn, Gord had managed to pinch a spidersilk kerchief and an ivory comb, lift a small purse from an incautious gentleman fretting while his lady looked at material in a dressmaker's, and filch two silver pieces from the tunic of a prosperous lesser cleric. He had missed an opportunity or two, surely, but he did so by choice. If the prospect looked too alert or too knowledgeable, the lad simply passed up having a go.

The Wizard's Hat was a place of considerable reputation, and it was filled with people. The tavern area was crowded with all sorts of men, while most of the tables in the main room were clustered with ladies and gentlemen eating and drinking, for it was but a bit past noon. A haughty Violet accosted the sweating proprietor and demanded a table near the front of the room. One look at her, and from her, and he hastened to comply. Who knew whose mistress she was or what influence she had? Anyway, a looker like that near the front of his place would encourage custom!

Once seated, Violet ordered a goblet of cooled green wine from Celene—a place Gord had never heard of. She waved him to a position off to one side, and the ostler brought him a small beer. While she dined on the finest provender of the establishment, Gord was served a sort of slumgullion that the serving maid identified as "raw goo." Violet struggled to suppress a smile when he asked her what it was.

"It's ragout," she said quietly with a stern expression on her face. "That's one word—a foreign way of saying it's a thin stew with more vegetables and the like than real meat. Slumgullion's better, but don't say that here, Gord! Now hush, or they'll cop wise as to where you're from."

Gord wrinkled up his nose and was about to whisper a reply when a shadow moved across the table. Violet fell immediately back into character.

"Get rid of that sullen face, boy," she snapped, "or I shall have you take your fare in the kitchen with the lackeys there! Have you no appreciation for my generosity?" As she spoke, Violet seemed quite annoyed and very much in charge in a mistress-servant relationship.

Gord bit back his words and obeyed her, for as displeased as he was about their relative meals and her imperious manner, he understood that she was now up to something.

"Pardon, Good Lady, but I noted your courage in allowing a serving boy to sup with you. May I be so bold as to suggest that you do so for lack of a proper gentleman escort, and to, ahem, offer my company?" With that he made a courtly bow and flourish, adding, "The Honorable Master Ralph, Elder of Seven Mile Mill, at your service."

Somehow, Violet managed to blush, lower her eyes, smile prettily, and stammer all at once. "Well, sir, or Honorable Master, I should say, I am at a disadvantage…."

"Pardon, m'lady, I shall take my leave then," said Ralph.

Gord was quite pleased with that turn of events, but before the fellow could turn away Violet spoke quickly:

"Oh, nay! Good Master, I am most grateful for your kindness and courtesy. I crave your pardon if you felt otherwise. It is just that a proper lady shouldn't converse with strangers, yet this knave is indeed unfitting company for one of breeding such as yourself…."

"Then perhaps our host will introduce us formally, I shall serve your Ladyship, and the boy can be sent to keep company with the scullions—he'd be more comfortable there, certainly. Why, look at him now—the picture of one ill at ease with superiors!"

Gord was indeed feeling out of place, and angry too, but there was neither word nor deed for him. He sat quietly as the gentleman gestured toward the ostler, who scurried over and performed his role in the ritual:

"Good sir, may I introduce Lady… aah… Penora" (after being informed by Violet) "…of… Dyvers," (again, filled in by the fair lady) "and to you, my lady, may I have the pleasure of introducing…" Gord found all of this to be quite sickening, all the more so because Violet seemed to be really enjoying herself. But when the amenities were over, that was the end of it for Gord. With no further ado, the proprietor put him in the charge of a bustling wench who, in turn, took him to the kitchen. There he finished his beer and "raw goo" and slumped glumly, wondering what to do now.

The answer soon presented itself, for several of the scullions and stableboys were gathered near the rear door rolling knucklebones. Well paid they must be, for each had a scattering of iron drabs, brass bits, and bronze zees before him. The bronze coins surprised Gord: These were stakes worth

his while! Forgetting about the handsome gallant and Violet for the moment, he moved toward the game.

Shuffling his feet and looking as stupid as he could, Gord asked what the boys were doing. Grinning, the leader asked if the inquirer had any money. If so, perhaps they'd be kind enough to teach him a wonderful new game—and give him a chance to win a fortune!

Gord bit at it perfectly, and soon he was being called by name while taking his turn at tossing the yellowish cubes. He lost more often than he won, but the proceeds he gleaned from his light-fingered work far outpaced the coins he gave up. As the game progressed, Gord worked at fumbling with coins so as to slip many of the growing number of zees into his pocket—away from the gaze of those being fleeced out of their wealth. The disappearance of the more valuable coinage was becoming apparent, and one of the stable boys started to ask a question about this, when a shriek came from the common room. Everyone from the kitchen rushed out to see what had happened. Gord joined the throng, but not before he managed to scoop up a good handful of the remaining coins. In the space of those few seconds, an uproar had come over the place.

The honorable gentleman from Seven Mile Mill had come staggering down the stairs from the upper floor, gasping and gesturing. As he stepped into the main room, someone saw a knife handle protruding from his upper back and screamed. Ralph turned a bluish hue and expired, falling face down. A babble of questions arose as Gord took in the scene. He heard the ostler shout for Lady Penora, while the wench who had shepherded Gord into the kitchen called out for her charges to find the lady's servant. Gord got away in the confusion, made the street, and used his best skulking techniques to become an invisible boy. He turned east at the first lane, twisted his trail several times to be sure he wasn't being followed, and as dusk fell made his way back to the rear of the pawnshop. In a matter of minutes thereafter, Gord, rag-wrapped and dirty, was reentering the headquarters of the Master of Beggars.

Gord found Furgo upstairs already questioning Violet, his face flushed with rage. It seemed that she had discovered the gentleman was no Town Elder at all, but a thief of no mean rate. Violet had found this out when she searched his purse. How did that come to pass? Well, the man, calling himself Ralph, had led her to dalliance upstairs, but instead of then falling asleep when she feigned slumber, he had slipped soundlessly out of bed,

taken her purse, and was just about to do the same with her cheap jewels when Violet sat up and objected. At this, "Ralph" had drawn his dirk and threatened to carve a second mouth into her throat if she made a noise.

Violet had stayed silent after that, but when the thief came over to truss up his victim before escaping, she had done something foolish—pulled out a knife she had secreted beneath her pillow and plunged the weapon into the thief's shoulder. The little blade was strongly poisoned, and the result was his death scene in front of dozens of witnesses. During the hubbub that ensued, Violet had gotten out a window and escaped, but in her haste she had taken the streets and entered the Old Town by a gate, so her progress could be traced at least that far. Furgo took her loot and ordered her to her quarters until she was sent for.

Then Furgo turned to Gord and got out of him what he knew. Gord also had to give up his hard-earned coins—all but a pair of silver nobles that he had hidden where only the most careful search would find them… and no such search was made.

Chapter 5

The next morning was like any other one of the hundred or more Gord had spent in the Beggarmaster's house. It seemed that way, at least, until Gord began to notice a certain tension written on the face of Furgo, Grasp, Will Whiner, and other masters. None of his fellow students seemed to notice, but Gord was more aware of small signs and body language than the others. He had turned out to be, as Clyde had predicted, the star pupil of the lot, even if Gord himself didn't realize it fully yet.

As his feeling of unease grew, Gord wished more and more to have a minute to himself so he could find Violet's group and see what she knew. The morning training session seemed to drag on interminably, but eventually the time for the noon meal arrived, and he hurried to the cellar to get his food and see his companion of the previous day. Violet wasn't there, however. This wasn't unusual; the groups did not always eat at the same times each day because there wasn't room for all of them at once in the cramped lower chamber. Under the ever-watchful eye of Furgo, Gord could not duck away to look for her, much as he wanted to.

He spent his meal time idly eating while again going over everything that had happened the day before. Then it was time for drill again, and after a seemingly endless afternoon session, Gord found himself the beneficiary of a surprise that he received with mixed emotions. He was feted by several of the masters because of his great progress, and the celebration was one that Gord should have relished. The instructors informed him that he was being moved from apprentice to least master, bypassing journeyman status altogether. This was an unprecedented advancement, but there was no great singing in Gord's heart at the news. He pretended joy and celebrated accordingly, but his mood was really dark and his spirit heavy. Something, he sensed, was wrong.

Dizzy-headed and reeling from the wine he had consumed, Gord was shown his new master-status room late that night. He fell into a drunken slumber and awoke the next day with a terrible taste in his mouth and an equally terrible hangover.

The news came early that morning: The Watch had found the body of the woman who was suspected of the murder of a man in the Garden Quarter. Whoever the victim was, the officials of the city were in an uproar over it. The newly found victim had been beaten, raped, and then strangled—

obviously the work of some of the many muggers who roamed the Thieves Quarter.

The victim was Violet, of course. Gord had figured all along that Theobald would never countenance mistakes such as those she had made. Gord was also sure that the fat son of a bitch had been happy to perform the execution of the errant Violet, that the Beggarmaster had thoroughly enjoyed the whole process. With a heart hard as granite, Gord bent himself to the day's activity. His vow to revenge Violet's degradation was nothing he needed to think about further until the opportunity arose. In the interim, he would simply work harder and get better at each and every skill he was given the chance to gain.

There was no outing the next day, as had been scheduled. The word was that training was more necessary than the extra income gained from field operations. It was evident to Gord that this was a lie. After all, what better place to get true training and experience than in the field? Actually doing was much better than practicing with dummies and the like; no matter how clever the lesson, it was just exercise, not real thievery Could the monster Theobald be afraid that his plot had been jeopardized by Violet's killing of that stupid thief? That he feared discovery was certain, or else he would not have killed Violet and left her corpse to be found by the Watch. That was a dual-purposed ploy. First, it would take the search for criminals in a different direction—and who actually cared if a murderess was in turn slain? Second, if the thieves thought that some daring beggars had overstepped their bounds, they might view Violet's killing as an apologetic execution, intended to pacify the thieves. Accompanied by a temporary cessation of non-Guild thievery, this would indicate to them that the Beggarmaster had discovered the offenders and eliminated their leader, and all was once again in proper order.

The fallacy in this line of reasoning was obvious to Gord, and he fervently hoped that Theobald would not also see it. The Guild would not be concerned overmuch about the killing of a single thief—and a foolhardy one, at that. Gord could imagine the leaders of the Guild, upon hearing of Violet's demise, spying to themselves, "Does fat Theobald really think we care about that?" They would bide their time, giving the Beggarmaster one last chance to change his ways. But if the beggar-thievery did not cease altogether…

When a week later the Beggarmaster's corps was once again sent into action, Gord was jubilant. He did his best to steal everything valuable, and not so valuable, in sight. He brought in a record haul, and for it he was given hearty congratulations by all of the masters of the beggar-thieves. They said openly that another trip such as Gord's today would certainly be sufficient to make him a full master, bypassing the interim rank of associate. Gord only smiled inscrutably. He knew what the results of the activities of the corps would bring….

The hall was in absolute chaos the next morning. During the night, a notice had been pinned to the front door by an assassin's dagger. It read:

THEOBALD, AND ALL THOSE SCABS FALSELY TRAINED BY HIM AND HIS DOGS, ARE RECOGNIZED AND HEREBY GIVEN DUE NOTICE THAT THEIR LIVES AND PROPERTY ARE FORFEIT TO THE WHIM AND EXECUTION OF THE THIEVES' GUILD. BEGGARS, SEEK A NEW MASTER! ALL THOSE LOYAL TO THEOBALD, PREPARE TO DIE!
ARENTOL
GRAND GUILDMASTER OF THIEVES
GREYHAWK AND ITS TERRITORIES

No one thought it a joke.

The beggars were immediately placed under a state of siege. It astonished Gord that Theobald managed to hold the loyalty of so many of the members of the Union. And it somewhat mystified him that there were persons around who were obviously something other than beggars. The hall swarmed with men in mail, robed clerics, black-garbed assassins, and even a handful of magic-users. The gross master of monstrosities must have thrown wide his coffer lids to pay for the likes of these, Gord mused. He was certain that there were few beggars plying their trade anywhere in the city. He would be willing to wager his small store of hoarded coins that none wore the wooden hand symbol of the Beggars' Union around their necks if they did dare to appear. No more cash would flow into Theobald's treasury until this matter was resolved, so the Beggarmaster had better have deep chests of coin for his hired swords and spell-casters.

The Lord Mayor and Directors of the city were turning a blind eye to the whole thing. After all, it was taking place in Old City's worst area, where the beggars lay between the Slum Quarter and the Thieves Quarter. Besides, who among the Directors would object to a war between beggars and thieves? Even the Guildmaster of Thieves, who was a Director of Greyhawk, would favor this conflict—it would weed out the less hardy and the less skillful in the ranks of the Guild, as well as get rid of a lot of the miserable beggars. The result would be a bigger share of the spoils of the city for each of the thieves who survived, and a correspondingly larger tithe to the Guild from each of them. For once, the Guildmaster of Thieves and the Guildmaster of Merchants were in total agreement on something. And every honest citizen would only see good in such a struggle. With fewer to beg, fewer to steal, they too could but profit. As Gord considered all this, he began to wonder if the officials of the city wouldn't wait until both sides were deeply enmeshed and then smash them both….

For the meantime, there was nothing to do but practice. The masters were in conferences and council meetings most of the time, leaving Gord alone to do as he wished. He took the opportunity to keep honing his skills, for he saw much benefit in the mastery of them. There was certainly a score to settle, but more importantly a livelihood to be earned. The easy life of thievery Gord had experienced was one that so far surpassed his dreams that no other goal had real significance.

The end of this idyllic period came in a fortnight. Beggars not ensconced within the safety of Theobald's walls were beginning to disappear, and some had been found dead—murdered in various ways. It was time to strike back, and Gord was to be part of the special force the Beggarmaster was sending forth to counter what the thieves were doing. The fat lord of the lowly understood that he must somehow settle this matter quickly. A protracted conflict could have only one end.

Theobald opened the deepest recesses of his headquarters. There was a hidden sub-basement beneath the place, and from it passages led in all directions. There was egress to the sewers also, which meant that there was a low road to nearly everywhere. Mercenaries and beggars would form teams for the retributive strike. The specially trained forces of the Beggarmaster would disguise themselves as various ordinary citizens. Nearby would be the hired swords. When a thief was spotted, the beggar-scouts would finger the victim, and then follow so as to keep track of him

or her. At first opportunity, the thief would then be taken hostage or slain. Hostages, Theobald stressed, were most important. Any skilled thief must be captured and brought back to the Beggarmaster's mansion if at all possible.

Each scout group consisted of a master and an apprentice. As a least master, Gord was a master nonetheless. He and San, a boy of no more than ten but nearly as large as Gord, were given the mission of going all the way to the River Quarter. The Strip, an area running from Dockside to Low Street, was notoriously wide-open and roisterous. Rivermen and bargers, riffraff and ruffians, soldiers and sailors all congregated there for fun and entertainment. Bawdy houses and taverns abounded. Gambling dens were nearly as common as saloons, and saloons were everywhere. In such surroundings, it was only natural that swindlers, cheats, and thieves would abound. In fact, while the headquarters of the Thieves' Guild was in the Old City, the group's main base of operations was centered on The Strip. Gord and San would simply be two more boys in the crowd, there for entertainment or whatever else they could manage.

San was one of the few of his fellow beggar-thieves whom Gord associated with and liked. The boy was clever and looked upon him as a mentor, especially since Gord had attained the status of least master.

"What are we going to do, Gord?"

"Easy, San. We just cruise The Strip and look for likely prospects. The Beggarmaster wants hostages to trade for his fat hide's safety. We'll line 'em up, and the muscle will knock them over," Gord said casually, even though he was filled with terrible tension at the assignment. After all, he was small and no match for an experienced thief. What if he somehow bungled the mission?

"Swell!" San said with a grin. "Just show me what to do, and it'll be easy—you're the best, Gord!"

Now Gord was even more nervous, for he had hoped that his comrade would have some idea of how to actually set up some tough and accomplished thief for capture. Obviously, his rank placed the burden solely upon his small shoulders.

San was looking at him expectantly, so Gord shrugged and replied, "Right. Just watch me, kid, and follow my lead."

Getting to their destination had been easy, if somewhat smelly. After passing down through the deep cellar, Gord, San, and three mercenaries

garbed in plain cloaks went through the sewers for nearly a mile. Their way was illuminated by a lantern that glowed with an oddly bright and steady light, which Gord concluded must have been cleric-cast light. The use of flame down here could be dangerous, for sewer gas was explosive as well as poisonous. But they had been told that this section was quite safe, and it did seem relatively unused, all in all.

When they reached the place marked with the symbol meaning "good action" in the Beggars' Sign, they clambered up a long ladder of rusty iron after hooding the lantern and leaving it to swing on a lower rung. One of the burly mercenaries had to lift the heavy grate barring the sewer's alley drain. Then all five emerged, the drain was closed with its grate again, and the two boys led the expedition through the dark streets of the quiet trade district toward Grand Square. The sword-wielders were well to the rear, and it was not obvious that the two groups had any connection.

Gord and San talked to each other, acted frolicksome, and laughed as normal boys out for fun would do. They walked the long way from near Waghalter Gate, the place in the wall of Old City where they entered the Thieves Quarter, past the Grand Square and Citadel, and through the Halls and Clerkburg rapidly. Their skill at seeming playfulness and dalliance, while they were actually moving quickly toward their destination, would have impressed the Grandmaster of Thieves. Pushing, shoving, and laughter led to one chasing the other, and then the roles were reversed—this was easy!

Once opposite the entrance to The Strip, the pair crossed The Processional and were soon deep among the roiling celebrants of the place. The Thieves' Guild represented more than robbers, burglars, cutpurses, and the ilk. The organization also controlled gambling, prostitution, swindles, extortion, loan-sharking, fencing of loot, smuggling, forgery, and counterfeiting, to list the more obvious. Most of these activities were going on here, visibly or invisibly.

Against such power, the beggars had few and weak means. Allied with the beggars were the lowly street gangs, quacks, gypsies, tinkers, pedlars, jongleurs, and actors. But none such were in view as the two lads strolled westward along the Street of Delights. There were more than the usual number of ruffians—not the street variety, but out-of-work laborers. Their presence in such large numbers indicated to Gord that they had been paid to roam the area in search of enemies of the Thieves' Guild. The dull eyes of

these toughs passed over both boys without really seeing them. Although it was not really worth the trouble, Gord actually went out of his way to steal the purse of one of these ruffians. They did need a few coins to spend anyway, or they would arouse suspicion when they began a serious search for a target.

A crowded gambling house called the Wheel of Gold drew Gord's attention. He and San went in casually, and both moved here and there. As a bouncer began eyeing them, Gord produced four bits and tossed the brass coins on a table where wagers were being made on which color hole a rat would appear from. His bet was on white. Nobody else seemed to have any faith in that color, for their bets were stacked in piles of bronze and copper, even a few silver nobles, on the eight other colors. San looked worried, but Gord smiled. Sure enough, the trained rodent eventually came through the hole before the white space. They now had eight brass bits, and Gord took them and left for another game.

"You're sure lucky!" San remarked to his companion.

Gord was surprised at this. "Lucky? You're kidding! White was the color that had to win."

Now it was San's turn to be surprised. "Don't try to tell me you can read rats' minds, Gord!"

"Shit, no!" Gord exclaimed. "Just use your head, dummy. Every other color had a stack of heavy coin on it, and I got my bits down just before the wheel was spun, so the rat had to come out on white."

"What? I don't follow you," San said, abashed.

"The game's rigged, of course," Gord explained with the patient voice of a teacher talking to an eager but somewhat slow pupil. "The shills win big, the suckers small, and the rat always comes up on the color the operator selects. There was big sucker money with all of the shills' coins, so when she scanned the table, the operator went for a big hit, cleaned out the chumps, and we doubled our cash!"

"Why'd she let us win instead of someone else?"

"Four brass bits? You must be jesting! Let's find our target and quit fooling around."

As the boys slowly wagered, and their coin supply dwindled, the three mercenaries moved into position nearby. Gord inclined his head only slightly, and the trio directed their attention to a table where dicing was bringing shouts and cheers. There were over a dozen players, mostly men.

With another nod and a finger signal, Gord pointed to a fellow dressed in dark blue velvet who seemed more interested in watching than in playing. He had his eye on a drunken river-boat captain who had been lucky indeed this evening; his purse bulged with winnings. The fellow had a pair of sailors with him, but these two were nearly as drunk as their captain, and both had had some measure of good fortune, too. Likely prospects indeed!

Gord and San wandered over to the dicing table and began carefully looking for the associates of the thief in blue, while pretending to be interested in the play and occasionally wagering. When the four others in the thieving group were located, Gord passed the new information to his cohorts in the same manner as he had conveyed the earlier intelligence. The stage was set.

The riverman wasn't stupid, even if he was well in his cups. When his luck had turned and the heap of coins before him had been reduced to half its former size, he decided to leave. After tipping the operator of the game, the proprietor of the house, and the serving girl who kept his jack filled with ale, all in lavish manner, the captain departed with his two crewmen in tow. All seemed less tipsy than they had while playing, but they were certainly inebriated and less alert than they should have been.

Four of the thieves had left several minutes ahead of the rivermen and taken up casual positions across the street from the Wheel of Gold. The three mercenaries had strolled out the door shortly thereafter and taken up an inconspicuous position a short distance down the street. Not far behind them were Gord and San, who came out the door and leaned against the outer wall of the Wheel of Gold, pretending to be occupied with counting their meager holdings while Gord actually kept a close eye on the proceedings. When the sailors exited the gambling house, they were promptly followed by the head thief in blue, not trying very hard to hide his presence any longer.

Gord had an excellent vantage point, much nearer to the rivermen than the four thieves or his and San's three cohorts. He noticed one of the sailors nudge his captain and cast his eyes briefly back over his shoulder, and the riverman responded with a small wink as he turned and headed across the street, toward a narrow passage between two buildings.

"Let's stop down this way for a minute, mates," the captain said, loud enough for all around to hear. "I needs to let out some o' that ale I been puttin' in." He and his guards continued into the dark corridor, undoubtedly

readying themselves to surprise whoever might follow them in. The fellow in blue continued to walk slowly after them, then paused against the wall just outside the passageway while the sailors moved on. The four thieves across the street, meanwhile, had disappeared inside the building adjoining the dark passage. A quick glance down the street told Gord that the mercenaries were likewise nowhere to be seen at the moment—but he trusted that they were on the job.

Counting slowly to himself, Gord estimated the time it would take the quartet of thieves to get through the building and out into the other end of the passage. His estimate was good, for at about the time he thought the four would be ready, the blue-garbed thief came to life. He drew a short sword from under his cape and entered the narrow space between buildings, going into a defensive crouch as he did so. The sound of steel on steel rang out—the rivermen probably carried long dirks, thought Gord, and even in their drunken state might be able to hold off a single swordsman.

Then, suddenly, there were cries of pain and surprise. The four thieves had struck from behind, and the sailors were in serious trouble. Unless one was aware of what was happening, and listening carefully, none of the combat sounds would have meant anything, for the shouts, laughter, shrieks, and music of the adjacent establishments combined with the noises of passersby to make a confused din. All was quiet in the dark passage for a minute, and then more cries and combat-noise came from the corridor—the beggars' mercenaries were giving the thieves a goodly dose of their own medicine!

It was time for the boys to move in. Gord looked at San, motioned for him to come on, and ran for the place. Gord wasn't particularly surprised to see that the knife he had taken from concealment and now held ready was duplicated by one that San held. The boy had produced a wicked-looking stiletto—in fact, even longer than Gord's weapon! Both were flushed with excitement, eager to join in the action.

They approached the entrance to the passageway, one on either side, just as a wounded thief came limping out, trying to get away. He ignored the boys for a second, seeing only curious urchins rather than dangerous foes. Just in time he saw San's blade darting forward. The man fended off the attack with an easy motion of his own weapon—a dagger as long and nearly as thick as a sword—and in so doing, knocked San to the ground.

As the thief turned and crouched to stab San, Gord's blow to the left side of his neck took him by complete surprise. The knife bit deep, and the man spun, trying to nail his new attacker, but it was too late. A heartbeat later he fell forward, dead. The boys quickly dragged the body back into the darkness of the passageway where some conflict still raged. Wisely, the two opted to strip the dead thief rather than attempt to mix it up in the confused melee near the middle of the passage. Gord took the thief's dagger and a ring from his finger. San searched for purse and pocket contents. Thereafter both crouched near the corpse, waiting to see what would transpire. The commotion ended with the thud of a body falling heavily onto the stones of the gangway.

"Theobald…" a voice hissed. The recognition signal—the mercenaries had indeed done their jobs well!

"Gord and San here," Gord replied. "The one seeking escape is dead!"

"Good work, lads!" the whispered reply came. "Let's take our prize and get the hell out of here. There'll be a devil of an uproar hereabouts soon."

The beggar boys joined the three mercenaries—who were breathing hard, but otherwise unscathed—and helped them finish looting the bodies. All of the others were dead—rivermen, thieves, the lot—save the man in velvet. Somehow the fighters had managed to pummel him senseless without slaying him, although he was wounded and bleeding.

It took a few moments for them to finish their stripping and rearranging. When they were done, the lads exited the passageway, followed shortly thereafter by four men. One appeared to be a drunken soldier of some sort, and the others were waterfolk, helping their passed-out captain back to his ship somewhere on the docks.

Chapter 6

Life aboard a gypsy barge was strange to Gord. Not that he minded the change, but it was odd. The group had managed to get through the River Quarter and through the Cargo Gate to the wharves beyond. Instead of seeking some ship, however, they had gone up toward Shack Town and met friendly Rhennee bargemen there—just what their instructions had told them to expect. Before dawn the still-unconscious thief had been bound, gagged, and rolled into an old carpet. A pedlar's wagon would soon have the prize moved to a place from where he could be spirited into the Beggarmaster's mansion.

And a prize he was indeed! Gord and his cohorts had learned, from a knowledgeable barger, that the fellow was none other than Ladav Idnorsea—a great thief, swindler, con artist, and impersonator. Some said that he was a likely candidate for Guildmaster one day soon. Score one for Theobald—and for Gord!

Now the two boys and three sellswords were housed aboard a small fleet of barges sheltering in a small backwater between the docks and the sprawl of Shack Town. This was now to be their base of operations, according to new instructions received by Gord from the pedlar who had picked up their "merchandise."

When he found that the new orders were addressed directly to him, Gord was flattered and a bit flabbergasted. He was just entering his thirteenth spring, he guessed, and was not used to being treated as anything other than a lad. Now the Beggarmaster was having orders passed on to him as if he were an adult, and an important minion of the Union at that! In the deepest voice he could muster, he had told the three fighting men of the change, and they accepted his instruction without a blink. Perhaps this was because of the new dirk that swung openly from his belt in this relaxed surrounding. But, the trio of mercenaries did actually treat both Gord and San with some respect—not considering them equals, perhaps, but at least worthy associates with skill in their own callings. San reveled in this exalted status, and Gord felt much the same way—but, as befits a leader, he kept his feelings more to himself.

The Rhennee were a puzzle to Gord. They were smallish and dark, much as he was. They seemed enthusiastic and bashful all at the same time. They spoke loudly yet in a self-effacing manner, but they were quick and very quiet when they wished to be so. That they could fight and steal, Gord

knew. The mercenaries showed these folks healthy respect, and Gord had heard many tales extolling their virtues as thieves. Fortunately, they were not allied to the Thieves' Guild. Gord realized that they were too free-spirited and independent to accept such an arrangement, and this was apparently why they had chosen to cast their lot on behalf of the Beggars' Union, which was also resisting the pressure of the Guild in its own distinctive way. Somehow, Gord felt, there was more to these Rhennee than met the eye. Without committing himself to any firm conclusion, Gord suspected that the Rhennee were quite unusual and something to be reckoned with.

If the men were interesting and capable, their womenfolk were doubly so. The girls were mostly breathtaking in appearance and bold in behavior—to a point. But the elder females seemed to be something mystical, a cross between seer, witch, and clerical matriarch. The young women deferred to the men with respect and downcast eyes, while the old women were deferred to in turn by the toughest of the men. That circle appealed to Gord. He'd happily have a lovely and submissive concubine while seeking guidance and wisdom for his actions from a grand matron. But then, Gord was young and understood little of life….

When they weren't making excursions into the city, all five of the Beggarmaster's agents were dressed as bargefolk. Brightly garbed in satins and gaudy accessories, they moved freely among the two dozen interconnected barges. No watcher would suspect that they were anything other than Rhennee. They had been here for more than a sennight now, and three other trips to The Strip and neighboring districts had netted them little in the way of hostages for Theobald. Several dead thieves could be credited to their activity, however, and all of them had acquired a fair amount of spoils from their efforts on behalf of the cause.

But Gord had the feeling that their luck would not hold for much longer, and he had begun to yearn for a change of scenery. Although staying on the barges was interesting and exciting, and this had certainly proved to be an effective base from which to carry out further raids on the thieves, he was eager to get back to find out what was happening in the Thieves Quarter. Besides, he had a fair stash of coins hidden there, and a score to settle with Theobald.

Gord was feeling confident now that he would somehow be able not only to get revenge on the dirty, fat bastard who had slain Violet, but also to profit big in the process. He was willing to trade his independence on the fringe of things for the chance to again be in the heart of the action, even if that meant being at someone else's beck and call. Anyway, he had promised a young girl named Adaz that he would go with her to the waters of the Nyr Dyv one day soon, and he really believed deep inside that his fate would eventually return him to the Rhennee. Now it was time for other activities, however.

"What's the matter, Gord?" San inquired forcefully. Gord was becoming irritable and restless. He'd just told his partner to bugger off for the third time in about fifteen minutes, and San was having no more of it.

"Oh, crap! It isn't your fault, San… sorry. This just isn't right."

"Hell, yes, it's right!" San shot back truculently. He was thoroughly enjoying the freedom and independence of their present position.

Gord shook his head and explained. "The Beggarmaster is a good… tactician—that's the word—but he's a bad… strategist. Spreading everyone around Greyhawk—putting us here to operate against The Strip—was smart. It's paid off."

"So what's wrong? You arguing with yourself?"

"Naw… San, the action is going to shift. Buggermaster Fatty has made the big mistake. I don't think the Guild will ever allow itself to be flummoxed just because Theobald has kidnapped a handful of its members, bigshots or not. The Guild *has* to beat Theobald and destroy the Union, or the thieves are through. And I want to be around Theobald when that happens. I want to be there when that rotten scum gets what's coming to him—or do it myself."

San shivered a little at the vehemence of Gord's statement and made no reply.

For Gord, the timing was right. Word came later that day: They were to leave their current base and return to Theobald's house. Every good man was needed there for a final confrontation, it seemed. They left immediately, after changing from Rhennee garb to their more mundane apparel. Entering Greyhawk from this area was no problem. Each paid his iron drab and passed through the great gate. Without difficulty, all five made the trek from the dock area to the Foreign Quarter. There they

separated, agreeing that each would find his own way back to headquarters to avoid attracting attention in a group.

The mercenaries' stride never faltered as they passed through Black Gate into the Old City, and the guards there never even looked up as they went by. San went in just as easily a few minutes later, and then Gord went last, after San had disappeared from his view. Despite the hostilities that had erupted, it was evident that those not obviously serving one side or the other were of no interest to anyone. Gord did not slow his step, emulating the fighters he had recently spent so much time with, for he felt himself as important now. He was coming home, more or less, to settle things.

The northernmost section of the Thieves Quarter was the locale controlled by the Beggars' Union. The beggars' territory actually spilled over into the Slum Quarter, but Gord avoided that area, assuming that it would be watched closely. He would attract little attention where the Thieves' Guild felt secure, he reasoned, so he strode up Haven Street and turned left on Redcobbles Lane, not bothering to avoid anyone. Sooner or later, though, he would have to pass through the area between the opposing headquarters. When Gord turned north and began to follow Cleaver, a street that passed near Theobald's domain, he was accosted.

"Hold it there, laddy," a voice said. A thin, black-clad fellow stepped out of a nearby doorway, hand on sword. He eyed Gord suspiciously.

Gord didn't feel intimidated at all. This surprised him a bit, for he still had memories of his "Gutless" days. "What do you want?" he inquired firmly.

"I want to know what you think you're doing, strolling around in a battle zone! Don't you know that this is the boundary between the thieves' territory and those dirty beggars yonder?" It was more of a warning than a challenge.

Dressed as he was, Gord could have been an apprentice thief, some ally, or just about anything except a beggar. Gord certainly didn't want to cause a scene—who knew what backup this sentry might have?

"Sure," he said. "I've heard about the trouble, and I thought I would take a look to see for myself how badly we've frightened 'em. In broad daylight, and armed"—here Gord patted his side where his belt knife was secured—"none of those feeble cowards would dare bother me."

"Cocky bastard, ain't you?" the man retorted. He looked closely at Gord and added, "Where you from, anyway?"

"Who the hell appointed you my master?" Gord spat back. He found himself actually incensed at this fellow's questioning. "I go where I choose and need no permission from you, sir!"

At that the sentry laughed. Before him was a youngster of tender years and scant size, armed with a knife no bigger than that with which the thief used to eat his joint of beef, daring him to contest his passage!

"Well, you're no beggar, anyway. If you want to get your throat slit, it's your affair, bandy-boy. Have at it." With that, the fellow retreated into his doorway, and Gord passed by without giving him another glance.

Although the area immediately beyond looked deserted, Gord felt a prickling sensation at scalp and spine when he passed gaping doorways and empty windows. There were eyes watching him, he knew. Then, a couple of blocks farther north, the streets began to show some signs of life again. Not much, but here and there a figure was out walking, a handcart being pushed, some tiny shops still open and doing business. All told, however, this portion of the quarter was virtually closed. If this dearth of economic activity was any indication, Theobald and his associates were in deep trouble.

As he thought about the impressions that this scene was creating in his mind, Gord realized that he no longer considered himself one of Theobald's servants. True, he was still officially bound to the fat creature who commanded the army of beggars, and in fact he was now on his way to report to Theobald. Still, Gord knew that he was now something more than a tool of the Beggarmaster….

Abruptly, six young toughs appeared before Gord, breaking his thoughts. Now, as he had expected, he would have to contend with sentries in the employ of the Beggars' Union. The leader of the group swaggered up to him, hands on hips, and surveyed him. Gord knew that had he been a full-grown man with a longsword at his hip, the six never would have shown themselves—unless they could have ambushed with rocks from above. Now they felt confident that they had an easy prize.

"Take me to Theobald, and be quick about it!" Gord ordered before the chief bully had spoken. The fellow's mouth dropped open at that, then clamped shut.

"Screw you, ya li'l pimp! Who in hell ya givin' orders to?"

"You, fool!" Gord replied. "I am Master Gord of the Beggars' Union, and my orders are taken direct from the Beggar-master. Now either accompany

me to the headquarters of Theobald, or get out of my path. I don't care which you do, but unless you act quickly, you'll regret it."

Gord had all he could do to suppress a smile as he watched the spectrum of expressions that passed across the young tough's countenance. Astonishment, fury, fear, and uncertainty paraded openly before Gord's gaze, as plainly as if the words themselves had been written on the oafs forehead.

"How in hell do I know that you ain't a spy for them thieves?" the leader finally asked, groping for some way to gain the verbal advantage. Although his five associates had crowded closer behind him during the exchange, their proximity did not reassure him, and his tone of voice now contained a tinge of whining.

Gord felt like calling him an asshole, threatening him further, and making all six of them sweat some more. How often had he had to suffer the humiliation of fear and cowardice? But instead, he simply said, "Take me to Theobald, and if I am a spy, he'll deal with me."

When the leader heard those words and saw the hard-eyed stare that accompanied them, he broke. "Naw… you're okay. I just hadda check, see? Them's *my* orders…."

By the time these last words were out of the sentry's mouth, Gord had already marched around the group and continued on his way. His lips curled into a satisfied smile as he heard the leader's final, plaintive cry: "Tell Master Theobald that Bugbear and his boys is doin' a good job… okay?"

In stark contrast to the rest of the neighborhood Gord had seen, the area around Theobald's place was a beehive of activity. When he was in sight of his destination, slowly strolling along, Gord was taken aback to see a squad of the Watch parade past in the street off to his side—and even more surprised to see a group of city officials entering the building! What was happening?

He stayed back to observe more and was soon further mystified by the sight of several of the beggars he knew openly entering and leaving the place. This was not at all what he expected. To be on the safe side, Gord went carefully around the area, checking everything out. The whole place was filled with the same sort of activity: open comings and goings, and many important-looking folk mingling with the beggars and their ilk, all under the aegis of groups of the Watch.

Gord decided to make his way into the headquarters by means of a secret underground passage that began in a building a bowshot distant from the place. He was not about to take any unnecessary chances despite the seeming security.

Nobody was in the hidden sub-cellar of the house when he entered, and Gord moved quickly through the place and up onto the main floor. There was action there aplenty, with beggars and their allies coming and going. Furgo noticed Gord, approached him briskly, clapped him on the back, and congratulated him for the success of his group's mission.

"Master Theobald's strategy was perfect!" Furgo exclaimed. "And Ladav Idnorsea was the key to our success," he continued. "The other teams met with mixed results. We lost a couple, and took several other thieves prisoner. Even killed a fair lot of 'em, too!"

"What's happening now?" Gord asked.

"With Idnorsea and the others in the bag," explained Furgo, "the master called for a truce. Both sides are still armed and waiting, but we're negotiating a settlement now."

"But what are the Watch and the city officials doing here?"

"His Lordship the Mayor doesn't want the warfare to continue… and that's a fact. Who knows what old rivalries would come up if it did? His emissaries told us that to avoid a possible division of the city into warring factions, they'd mediate the dispute and make certain that the Thieves' Guild settled things on terms just for both sides."

Something rang false in this explanation; it sounded like something Furgo had rehearsed, or someone else's words that he was repeating. But what could Gord say? At best he was a youngster, even if he was a least master and a relatively successful servant of Theobald. Furgo and a score of others here outranked him, not only in status but in age and experience. He did not openly question or contest what Furgo had told him, feeling that this was the truth as far as Furgo knew it to be.

"I'm heading for the audience room now to report. If he has time, I'll see if Theobald wishes you to appear. Get something to eat, and I'll be back in a few minutes." So saying, Furgo turned and scurried off to see the head of the Union.

It seemed a good idea, that. Gord was feeling peckish, and something from the kitchen might not hurt, even if the stuff was slop. Better something than nothing. He'd come a long way, Gord thought, recalling how a rat-

sullied chunk of grease-coated bread had once seemed a feast to him… and how that vegetable swill had seemed to be nectar and ambrosia when he had first eaten in the Beggarmaster's kitchen. Things had changed.

Nobody was in the kitchen, so Gord helped himself to the best provisions he could find—cheese, a fatty sausage of scant size, and a stale bun. No wonder the place was empty—it certainly didn't have much to offer. After finishing the meager meal and waiting for a half-hour, Gord decided that Furgo would find him if the Beggarmaster commanded his presence, so Gord headed for the upper loft. He said hello to some of the apprentices who were loafing around there, and then went to his own quarters. He was hardly surprised when a brief inspection revealed him that someone had searched the place in his absence. Everything had been put back in its place so he supposedly wouldn't notice, but whoever had done the job hadn't discovered that he'd set things up just so as to be aware of rifling. A hair placed here, a strand of cobweb there, had been displaced.

Gord decided to check his cache of money, not in the least worried that it had been disturbed. He pulled the old crate that served as his table and dresser over to an empty corner of the room, stood upon it, and removed a splinter from the rafter overhead. The beam was old and dry, and the piece had been loose when he was assigned the room. Gord had carefully worked it free and used his knife to gouge a space behind it, a place large enough to hold a handful of coins. Being more careful still, he had used the blade to drill and peg the beam and the splinter. When he replaced the broken piece, it stayed firmly in place, and his most careful scrutiny satisfied Gord that nobody would guess that the piece could be taken off without breaking it. Inside he had first stored his few brass bits; now the trove held far more than that.

Gord took out the coins quickly, replaced the chunk, and moved the crate back where it belonged. He added the bronze zees, copper commons, silver nobles, and one shining silvery-gold electrum lucky to the purse he had tucked under his belt. They clinked against the pair of coins and the ring he already had in there. He stretched out on the lumpy cot, relaxed, waited for his summons, and dozed off….

Gord, always a light sleeper, came awake instantly at the sound of a noise he did not know. What was it? The old building was full of noises. It creaked and settled by itself, and there were always other noises, too—the

voices and comings and goings of the many beggars who stayed here. But what had awakened him was something else.

There, again! It was a muffled thud from the chamber next to his. The wall between was thin, and Gord could hear more faint sounds through it now. It sounded unmistakably like a near-silent struggle to Gord, and he reacted swiftly, hoisting himself up soundlessly to the rafter above his cot. Then, a furtive footstep outside his door told him that his decision had been wise. From his perch on the rafter, Gord watched the door. The latch moved quietly upward and the portal swung inward with barely a creak. The dim light of the guttering tallow candle on the crate glinted off the reddened point of a sword. The hand and arm that held the blade swiftly followed it inside. Gord saw a leather-armored man scan the room quickly, noted the rumpled cot, and the apparently empty room. The swordsman stepped in, felt the place where Gord had dozed only moments before, and grinned evilly. He stepped back from the bed, stooped, and thrust the short, bloody weapon into the place under the bed where he imagined a frightened beggar-thief was hiding. As he did so, Gord pounced.

The force of his fall sunk the long dagger Gord held before him through the thick hide and padding so that its full length buried itself into the would-be killer's back just beneath his left shoulder blade. Gord's weight and the momentum behind his plunge felled the fellow as if he'd been pole-axed, and as he flattened on the floor with a whoofing noise, the tip of the dagger bit into the wood and pinned him to the floor.

This foe was a tough one—no run-of-the-mill thief, to be sure. Without outcry, the man tried to turn and get at the weight on his back, but the dagger held him immobile long enough for Gord to take out his second weapon, the short knife, and strike again. His wild swing slashed the killer's right forearm as the fellow tried to ward off the blow. The wound caused him to gasp and reflexively drop his sword. Gord tossed away his shorter blade and, by lunging out and away from the man's body, managed to snatch up the invader's weapon. Even as the man freed himself from the floor, Gord was up and attacking again. The third time was the charm.

The sword rose and fell twice more before Gord was satisfied that the enemy was finished. Had he not taken him totally unawares, and then had him pinned down, Gord knew that the man would have slain him. Gord was shaking and sweat-covered. He stood absolutely silent, holding his breath. Had anyone heard the fight? Was another murderer coming? No footsteps

indicated this, and no outcry arose. Whatever was going on, apparently no one but Gord knew about it.

With actions born more of instinct than intention, Gord searched the body of the dead thief. There were a few coins in the man's girdle, and Gord pocketed them without thinking. He returned his knife to its sheath on his right hip, drew out the great dagger, wiped it clean, and replaced it in the sheath between his shoulder blades. Finally, he took the belt and scabbard from the corpse. The belt was too large for his slender waist, but he used it as a hanger, slinging it over his right shoulder, and sheathed the sword on his left hip. Softly, Gord crept from his room and into the unlit corridor beyond to discover what was going on.

He passed several open but dark doorways before the glow from a flickering lamp within one room allowed him to determine what was happening. The bloody truth was there before his eyes. Jenk lay on the floor of his room in a pool of congealing gore. His corpse was covered with wounds, and his throat was cut. He had been the first of the masters, and the first renegade thief to enlist with the Beggarmaster.

Further examination of a few more of the apartments told the whole story. Somehow, a band of thieves had penetrated the place and set about killing the beggar-thieves and beggars inside. Gord felt that it would be pointless for him to go higher in the building. They had probably started from above, assaulting the beginners and apprentices first after gaining entry from the rooftop, and worked their way down. As the least of the masters, Gord had been assigned the smallest room and the one farthest from the stairs. He was most thankful for that. Gord surmised that the man he had slain was the only one left on the floor, the one given the job of cleaning up the last bit of work before moving on. He decided he had better do something fast, for the killers would certainly be finishing the floor below by now and readying themselves for the final encounter—the settling with Theobald.

Gord ran to a secluded back stair that was hardly ever used and silently bounded down the steps all the way to the bottom, where the passage opened into the pantry of the kitchen. Gord saw light around the edges of the ill-fitting door that separated the storeroom from the commissary area beyond. Cautiously, he peered through a large crack to see what was going on. There was the gross Beggarmaster, lantern in hand, followed by San straining under the weight of a metal box he carried, heading for the concealed entry to the subcellar. Gord jerked the door open and stepped out.

The suddenness of his appearance made Theobald utter a startled gasp and nearly caused San to drop his burden.

"What? Oh, it's you, boy! Don't ever do anything like that again, or I'll have you flayed and impaled, damn your eyes!" All that was said in the Beggarmaster's usual falsetto, but the threat was real. The fat man took a breath and continued in a slightly more rational tone. "Don't stand there like the fool you are! Help this weakling carry my chest. We must leave now!"

Gord said nothing and moved quickly to take one of the handles of the iron box from his small friend's grasp. Together they managed its weight easily, the box held between them. The Beggarmaster had moved on ahead to the hidden portal, glancing back a couple of times to make sure that the boys were bringing the chest as he'd ordered. Theobald got the door open and stood aside as the pair struggled through. He then followed, shut the portal, and pulled a bar across it.

"That should keep them out for a bit," he observed. Then he spun to face the two boys again. "Fortunate for you two rats that you've survived this debacle…. I have been betrayed by none other than the Lord Mayor himself!"

Gord nearly snickered aloud at the rage and hurt in Theobald's tone. It seemed incredible to Gord that the fat idiot hadn't expected something like this to happen. What other result could have occurred, given the circumstances and the power of the two quarreling groups? As members of the ruling elite of Greyhawk, surely the thieves counted for far more than the lowly beggars, even with their associated fellows—all of them deserving of whatever vengeance the Directors chose to mete out. How could that blubbery clown ever have imagined that a handful of hostages would tip the balance in his favor? It had always been but a matter of time before the Guildmaster of Thieves and his henchmen would strike.

"How did you escape?" Gord whispered to San.

"I heard a fight in the room next to mine, and I ran for my life," San whispered back. "I stopped to alert the master, and as a reward he made me carry his treasure box," he concluded sarcastically with a cold look in Theobald's direction.

The Beggarmaster did not overhear any of this because he was occupied. He had gone to a corner of the chamber and uncovered the mouth of a hidden well—yet another exit from the place, and one Gord had never seen.

"Bring that box here," Theobald grunted. Gord and San complied, then stood waiting for what would happen next.

"Put it on the floor, you little oafs," the Beggarmaster said imperiously. "Can't you see that I need assistance in getting down the first part of this wretched ladder?"

They rested the heavy chest on the stone flags as commanded and helped the obese man to carefully find the first rung of the ladder that descended the side of the shaft.

Theobald's pudgy fingers closed around Gord's shoulder, sending pains shooting into his neck, as the fat man nervously felt with his foot for the next step down. "Be careful now, you idiots!" he blustered. "One slip is all it takes… it's a hundred feet to the bottom of this cistern."

When he got low enough, the Beggarmaster released his grip on Gord's shoulder and grabbed the topmost rung of the ladder. Gord watched him slowly continue to climb down, moving forward to see into the shaft. Some eight or nine feet below the floor level was a narrow ledge beside the iron rungs protruding from the stone blocks of the well. The Beggarmaster stepped off the ladder onto this projection, and the light of the lantern that swung from his belt revealed the mouth of a small opening that led off to the side. Theobald looked up at the pair above, once again completely sure of himself.

"I suppose I'll save you, too—you've been faithful servants and can be useful still." He stretched his arms up and said, "Pass me the chest, and then get your arses down the ladder—and be sure and close the trapdoor as you come down!"

Gord motioned San to one side, lifted the weight of the iron box by himself, and knelt beside the opening with the coffer in his arms. The Beggarmaster peered up expectantly as he saw the coffer come into view.

"Give it to me, dolt!"

Without a word or a glance downward, Gord let the box drop. There was a brief scream, a meaty sound of metal striking flesh, and then a long, drawn-out shriek that echoed off the walls of the old well before being cut off by a faint splash.

"That was the bugger's treasure box, Gord!"

"It was worth it," said Gord quietly, with a smile.

Chapter 7

It was a quiet night in the Roc and Oliphant. Sometimes the little tavern at the end of Burnbook Lane would be packed to overflowing, but not this time. Gord was the only customer. The young man sat at the back table where the senior students congregated when they were around, a half-empty pewter flagon of wine before him. He was at ease in the wooden chair, his mind lazily wandering through what had transpired in his life after he had slain the Beggarmaster with his own iron treasure box….

He and San had then made haste to get away, taking the side tunnel off the well-shaft that the fat tyrant had planned to use for his own escape. They had found a way out easily enough, for the drain had long been sealed off and prepared as a route in case flight was ever called for. Thoughtful, that fat bastard was, mused Gord. At the far end, near a manhole, they had found a large trunkful of gear stashed for possible need. He and San had both found much usable in its contents—some clothing, a sack to carry it in, materials for use in disguise that they took for later, and a pouch containing a pass that allowed unquestioned exit and entry through the various gates of Greyhawk for whoever presented it. Gord wondered about the origin of that benison as they opened the manhole cover and emerged into a closed courtyard in an abandoned building; once they got into the outdoors, stealing away into the night was a simple matter. Gord had not dared to use the gate pass right away, fearing that its employment by one so young might arouse suspicion as to how it was obtained. But it had come in handy several times in the more recent past.

Best of all in the booty they had found were the coins hidden in the folds of a leather wallet—an even half-dozen each of orbs and plates. Neither lad had ever seen real gold or platinum currency this close up before, and they took a minute or two just to look at them in wonder. Gold orbs were equal to a thousand bronze zees each, and the rectangular platinum plates were equal in value to one thousand, one hundred zees—an orb and a lucky combined. Wealth beyond their highest hopes, a great boon indeed, but Gord remembered that when he had first held the coins, he could not help but wonder about the fantastic contents of the iron box…. Perhaps it hadn't been worth it after all. Well, too late now.

The first few months afterward had been trying for both of them. They had gone to the Foreign Quarter, supposing that the anonymity afforded

them by that sector of the city would allow them to get settled and decide what they should do. Neither was certain if the Thieves' Guild was looking for them or not. There could be a price on either or both their heads for all they knew.

The Foreign Quarter had soon proved to be a poor choice. Two small boys, even lads who appeared competent and wore weapons, were something of a novelty. They were too noticeable. Some thought them prey, others curiosities, and so forth. They moved from place to place, seeking to avoid these unwanted intrusions on their privacy. A shabby inn here, a waterside boarding house there, and even a deserted shanty made into a secret den. Nothing seemed to suffice for long. Compounding their problems, both boys knew they must continue to exercise and practice, even though this ran counter to their desire for seclusion, for neither had a thought about abandoning the pursuit of their skills in the arts and crafts of thievery. Hate the thieves of the city they did, but not their profession!

They found themselves forced to give up the Foreign Quarter when they bungled a job of pocket-picking on some foreigner whom both managed to underestimate. He set up a hue and cry after them as they fled, and the pair were lucky to escape that incident. That night they moved out and into the Quarter of Craftsmen just beyond the south wall of Old City. The place was safe enough, as long as they kept a very low profile. They stayed in a dull hostel there for about two months, hardly ever venturing out. They paid promptly, and the ostler didn't ask any questions. However, staying low didn't make for fun, and they were young and fun-loving. It wasn't a place to work at thievery, either. They did, discreetly, a few times, but the returns were hardly worth the risk and effort. Dreariness and confinement led to pacing and short tempers. After several senseless arguments and exchanges of blows, Gord and San knew that they had to find a real place for themselves in this big city.

Funds were not a problem. It turned out that San also had a reserve of coins he'd managed to sequester. Even without the orbs and plates provided so thoughtfully by "Buggermaster Fattybald," the boys had been happily surprised by the size of their combined stack of coins. The worth of that hoard was near a thousand zees. And they had augmented their cash by clever applications of their mutual profession, so that they had not been forced to touch their reserve.

Although it seemed probable that there was no active search for them, and that no bounty was posted for their heads, they would be in trouble if any thief recognized them. This was very obvious, for there were still few beggars on the streets. Knowing full well that the upper part of New Town was closed to the likes of them, they tried to determine what viable territory remained for them to inhabit. After careful discussion and debate it was agreed that the Low Quarter, The Strip, and the River Quarter were not conducive to their continued liberty and life. Either they could remain where they were—perish that suggestion!—or try the Clerkburg. And while the latter thought had little appeal, staying put had less.

Clerkburg was the district of the bureaucrats and the bookish. The upper end was filled with clerks, administrators, scribes and the like, for it was near The Halls—the government sector of the city and the location of many of its religious edifices as well. The lower portion was given over to the colleges of Greyhawk's university, with attendant housing, shops, and minor schools as well. There was no choice other than this, and off the two went as soon as was practical.

As they soon had discovered to their mutual surprise, Clerkburg was a wonder unto itself. The great stone colleges and imposing cathedrals lining The Processional hid another world behind them. This area was dotted with mazes of interconnecting buildings, small, walled parks, and other such obstructing physical features that formed a second line of defense between the world of academia and the rest of the city. Inside Clerkburg were hundreds and hundreds of students, many of them nearly as young as Gord and San. This was just the place for them.

It was an easy matter to find an out-of-the-way place to stay. Their new digs, as they later learned to call their chambers, were in an ancient inn called The Acorns, near the great wall that surrounded the New City. Their host, Calvert, an elderly, red-faced man full of good humor and jokes, told them that his family had run the inn since before the wall was extended to encompass it. A narrow stone stairway led up to the rooms above the ground floor, which contained the bar, the dining room, the kitchen, and the hosteler's own apartment. Gord and San arranged to take the attic above the guest floor, and although it needed attention, they were delighted with it. Not only was it large and complete with several windowed gables, but a gnarled oak lifted its stout branches from the rear yard to the windows that looked over it—an unobtrusive means of egress and entry whenever they

wished to go undetected. The rent was one copper common a week, four a month if they paid that way, in advance. Gord had paid a month's price immediately, and they had stayed there at The Acorns ever since…. Could it truly be almost three years already?

Making good on their supposed reason for coming to the Clerkburg promised to be more difficult than finding quarters had been. When they first took up residence in the academic area, the college term was over, and most students were elsewhere for several weeks until the new one began. But if Gord and San were to be seen as students, they had to *be* students—the boys had to find someone to accept them as pupils. From his lessons in Theobald's hall, Gord had developed fair proficiency with the pen, and he could read Common speech as well as the basics of the modern Oeridian and Suel languages. He could read maps, building plans, and some small amount of the writings used in spells. He could skillfully use the silent speech of the beggars and understood much of the patois of both the Rhennee and the Thieves' Cant. San had about half this much skill, all told, and both initially had felt rather confident at their prospects for entering some college.

They hit upon the idea of becoming acquainted with an old sage by the name of Prosper who dwelt nearby. The fellow grew herbs and puttered in his workshop when not reading. Since Calvert had once introduced them, the boys felt free to approach the old man. Their vast ignorance in all subjects was quickly made obvious to them, as the ancient scholar deluged them with what he claimed were simple questions, and neither lad could answer one in twenty.

"What are the nine known dimensions of the multiverse?" the good doctor demanded.

San managed the three obvious ones—length, breadth, height.

"Astrality and ethereality," Gord added proudly, but he was stuck after that.

"Time, probability, extra-conceivability, and nonconceivability," Doctor Prosper finished, and both boys squirmed.

"From whence came the Common Tongue?"

"When was the Empire of the Aerdi overthrown?"

"What is leverage?"

"How can you explain technology?"

Gord took a shot at that one. "It is a myth of the ignorant used to fool gullible folk and frighten children!"

"Nonsense!" the elderly scholar retorted. "It is the counterpart of magic within the dimension of probability and works in inverse proportion to it." Then he resumed firing off questions.

"What was the Invoked Devastation, and when did it occur?"

"Of what use is basilisk blood in alchemy?"

"Enumerate the Inner Planes—there are twelve. Name them."

"Relate the major deities of Oerth to the minor ones, and explain how they relate to the forces of the Lower Planes."

"What is the largest tree known?"

"Roanwood," San shot back with relief.

"Good," said Prosper. "And what vegetation and creatures are typically found in association with roanwoods?"

There was no reply forthcoming, so the sage continued his barrage.

"What are the characteristic differences between the races of men? Do they make us into different species, or merely indicate variations? Likewise, explain the racial differences of demi-humankind, and relate them to humans."

"This is most unfair, Doctor Prosper! You are a renowned sage!" said Gord, a twinge of desperation in his tone.

"Come, come, lads," the white-bearded chap said, shaking his head. "What authority have you that I am renowned? No, no. Quite the contrary. I am but a minor scholar now put out to pasture, seen as being too old to have anything worth teaching today's students…." The old man paused and fixed first San, then Gord with his stern gaze. "That's not to say you both aren't abominably ignorant, though it is surprising that you know your letters so well."

The boys looked at each other, but before either could think of any reply, the old man concluded the interview.

"I'd have mistaken you both for a pair of cleaned-up urchins from Old Town way, but where would you find funds to be here, and how could you be staying in that loft you're furnishing at The Acorns? Then I supposed that you were a pair of precocious thieves, what with the funds you have and the sort of weapons you tote about, but then why would thieves be wishing to become educated?

"Therefore, I must conclude that you are a pair of bright lads from the back country sadly in need of edification and instructions. Lessons begin next Waterday, and you'll get only Godsday free from them each week—that is, if you can afford the tuition."

Again Gord and San looked at each other in blank surprise.

"Well, come now! Can you? It's the standard charge—six zee per week, each, you know, and you must bring enough lunch to feed your teacher as well as yourselves."

Studies were hard under the crotchety Doctor Prosper, but he was a mine of information. Although it was surely known to Calvert that his tenants attended no regular school, but were instead tutored by his neighbor, the good man never made mention of it. The drill continued for the whole time of the university's sessions. The sage worked both boys hard, and they found that they had to do more than pay tuition to him and bring extra food. There were always things to buy—quill pens, parchment, blank scrolls and books, and occasionally even a scribed text of some sort, although Prosper would usually allow the boys to utilize his personal library under his keen-eyed surveillance.

Although studies, homework, and occasional carousing took most of their time, both boys had promised themselves that they would not allow their more nefarious talents to grow rusty and forgotten. Things had quieted sufficiently so that they felt comfortable outside the district. On their one day of the week free from lessons, Gord and San would walk with the stream of students drifting toward The Strip. There, and in the fringes of the River Quarter and Low Quarter as well, they worked at picking pockets, slitting purses, pilfering small items, and even the planning of mock burglaries, robberies, and executions. By these activities they didn't profit much, but enough, and neither was detected.

One day San brought two old locks back to the loft. He'd picked them up at a locksmith's for a small price, for both were old and in need of work. It became a game for them, first to repair such old locks, then to pick them open. Soon the place was littered with heaps of repaired and oiled locks, of all sizes and descriptions, that the two had mastered. Gord made a fair profit by peddling them back to the same locksmiths who had originally got rid of them. San was pleased, talked Gord out of the money they'd made, and went out to find the best locks that their money could buy. In this fashion—

studying, practicing, carousing, and lock-picking—the boys passed nearly a year, and generally had a good time in doing so.

With the end of the instructional term came news from Doctor Prosper. He informed the boys that teaching them had grown tiresome to him—they were slow students, always asking dumb questions, and generally trying the patience of a weary old scholar. No, he didn't deserve such punishment in his declining years. Instead, he had talked to some old associates at Grey College, and the troublesome fellows would be their charges next term.

This was incredible news! Grey College wasn't the most fashionable institution, but it was the oldest and was renowned for its professors. Now they were true students! During the "nineweek," the hiatus in summer that included Wealsun month, Richfest week, and Reaping month, the two celebrated continually. They also spent a lot of time at their work, so to speak. One of the first things they managed was a new wheelbarrow for Prosper, which they filled with gardening tools, a keg of Renstish schnapps, and wheels of cheese and huge sausages, and an assortment of old ale to top the load off. The Doctor never mentioned it, but Gord knew he was pleased. Before their schooling began again, Gord also located an arms instructor willing to accept two young pupils who wished to learn the use of sword and dagger, for while they had often practiced the nonviolent crafts of thievery, they were both in need of bettering themselves at weaponplay.

College was not all that they had hoped. It wasn't just that the studies were hard; their classmates were snobbish and the dons were worse. Gord managed better than San, for he was older—though by this time the younger boy had grown taller and larger than Gord. When their first year of instruction at Grey College ended, San informed his friend that he had had enough of bookish pursuits. There was no arguing with him, and that week he went off to apply to the Thieves' Guild as a cutpurse, even though they both knew his skills were a notch or two greater than that.

San had met a pretty young lass in the course of one of the boys' forays on The Strip. They were soon seeing one another regularly, and she had told him that her father was a ranking member of the Guild, so San had confessed his own skills. After that, nothing would do but for him to talk with her father, and the result was foregone thereafter.

Gord and San had a farewell party, and then the latter young man left their loft at The Acorns, promising to return often. He had come a few times at first, but the visits grew less frequent, and shorter too, and then

stopped altogether around Needfest break during Gord's next academic term. Gord maintained the big apartment alone, using the empty area as an exercise and practice space.

Now his second year as a college student had come to an end, and Gord was undecided and restless. After all, how much did he need to know about politics, philosophy, natural and supernatural arts, pantheology, and the like? Sure, it was interesting to learn ancient, dead tongues and the history of Oerik and the Flanaess, but enough was enough. Gord liked action better, and he needed excitement—like the time he had tossed a light-stone into the window of the professor of mathematics and its light had revealed the don in a compromising position with the flighty son of a city official…. Gord's fellows had been ringed round to see and had cheered!

Gord wanted adventure—not lectures, scrolls, and tomes. He thought it was high time he put his lessons in the art of swordsmanship and dagger-work to the test, too. How much better than this sheltered life!…

Four craftsmen from a nearby village entered the Roc and Oliphant and took a table nearby. Gord recognized them; they were staying at The Acorns while they attended a meeting of their chapter of the Artisans' League. After ordering bumpers of the local brew, the four fell into conversation about their trade. Gord could not shut out this droning and endless shop-talk, even by downing all of his wine and ordering more. When more of their fellows joined them, Gord abruptly decided that, as of this minute, he had had enough of this kind of life. He got up, stalked away to his chambers, and began gathering up his necessary possessions. An hour later he bade the good ostler Calvert adieu and exited the inn forever.

Soon he was beyond the pale of Clerkburg and striding up The Processional. Since he had money to spend and wished some real action, he was going to the High Quarter to see what he could see. It was time to start at the top!

Chapter 8

"A dragon!" exclaimed Lord Dolph. "You must now beat *three* towers, Your Reverence!"

The Patricians' Club, a luxurious gaming house in Greyhawk's High Quarter, had many tables, each offering a different amusement for those rich and noble gamers who sought excitement and the thrill of wagering fortunes upon chance. Little skill was required; most of what transpired depended upon the spin of a wheel, the sum of oddly shaped dice, and similar devices where random patterns allowed long odds and dumb luck to reign supreme. At an ornately carved table in a special corner, however, a game that pitted players directly against each other was taking place.

Five wealthy participants were involved, and they had contested for several hours now, fortune smiling first upon one, then another, so that not a single player had yet been forced to quit the table for lack of funds. The most notorious of the five was Arentol, the Grand Guildmaster of Thieves, a tall, thin fellow of saturnine nature and somber dress. He always watched the eyes of his opponents with an unblinking gaze.

Next to Arentol was Sir Margus, a very young, effete-looking Velunese. His age combined with his title indicated that he was undoubtedly the son of a great noble and thus had gained his knighthood through means other than bold deeds.

Adjacent to the Velunese knight was Madame Belldray.

The widow of Degol Belldray was certainly one of the richest commoners in the city—so wealthy that she could move in noble circles without question. She was plump and soft and covered with jewels. In a pudgy, middle-aged way, Madame Belldray was attractive, so she was much sought after by men whose fortunes were in flux, so to speak. This night she was clad in brocaded silk of ivory and golden hues that nearly matched the colors of her fading blonde tresses.

Just after Lord Dolph, the Baron of Cairnway, spoke triumphantly regarding his newly displayed tableau, Madame Belldray smiled vacuously at the man to her left, Vronstein, a High Priest of Zilchus, and said, "Oh, my goodness! Can you imagine such luck? Do you suppose you can beat Lord Dolph's three towers? What will you do?"

Without comment, the richly dressed priest seated between the lady and Lord Dolph turned over the ivory plaque before him, his long, pale fingers seeming to move contemptuously. He smiled as a green horsehead was

revealed on the reverse side. "That makes a Host of four, I believe, Lord Baron."

The sour expression that came over Lord Dolph's face as he viewed the emerald depictions of bow, sword, and spear capped by the horse showed that it was indeed a Host, a powerful tableau. All of the men now turned to watch as Madame Belldray took her turn.

"That's no good at all," the plump dowager said in a tone of disappointment as her bejeweled hand exposed a plaque with the green magic sigil on it. Now, His Reverence The High Priest Vronstein could gain no all-conquering Host, at least, but the Madame still had but a pair of coffers showing. She turned over two more of the ivory tiles, revealing the dwarf and a crown. The crown could build to a winning hand, but only if her two remaining plaques were likewise coffers—and those were long odds. With only two plays remaining for her, Madame Belldray must either wager or yield.

"I feel dreadfully lucky this evening!" she stated enthusiastically. "So, I shall increase the stake by another orb—no, by another plate!" She pushed a platinum lozenge into the pile of coins in the center of the table.

There was some surprise among the players when Sir Margus not only met the stake but increased it by an orb. He had lost rather heavily this night, and now seemed bent on bankrupting himself by attempting to recoup it all in one losing hand. He showed three tiles up, a red sigil and two gates.

Arentol likewise had three up and four plaques down, with three spears showing. "It seems that playing with a blessed cleric is unwise," said the guildmaster. He too had lost considerable sums. "I am caught between towers, His Reverence, a lady who feels Ralishaz smiles upon her, and a risk-taker extraordinaire," he observed. "And, worse, I think I can garner no fifth spear, even should the fourth be here," he added as he tapped his tiles, "so I must yield." He quietly turned over his exposed plaques and sat back.

Lord Dolph placed his platinum and gold coins into the pot, and then His Reverence Vronstein increased the wager by yet another plate. Reluctantly, Madame Belldray met it, Sir Margus did likewise only after going to his purse, and then Lord Dolph also saw the bet. The action passed to the young knight.

"Let us see with whom fortune actually plays," Sir Margus said as he casually flipped his next flat ivory rectangle so as to show its face: a black

sigil.

"Cities and magic don't mix, sir!" urged Lord Dolph. "Let's get on with it!"

Without any indication that he took offense at the mustachioed baron's rudeness, the young man lazily reached for his next plaque and tipped it. "Hmmm …"he ruminated, eyes now fixed upon the baron. A bet was again demanded by the rules of the game, for Sir Margus had but two tiles remaining face down. It was evident from the facial expressions of the other players that they did not envy him his position. Already in deep, he had but little chance to defeat the cleric's Host, while the Baron Dolph had some considerable opportunity.

"Let us be restrained—a lucky," offered the young knight.

As the electrum disc went into the center of the table, Lord Dolph was already shoving two coins in. "And an orb," he said with menacing flatness in his voice. Margus had but a few pieces of currency before him on the table, and the baron thought it time to force the upstart youngster out of the play.

Each of the others at the table saw the wager. Sir Margus stared at the glitter of gold, silver, platinum, and electrum in the pot, shook his head, and stared at the baron. As Dolph smiled condescendingly at him, a gold coin appeared in the young man's hand, and he said, "I'll see the wager also."

Now everyone at the table was watching with enhanced interest—this hand was becoming a personal matter of pride between two noblemen. And by this time, the game had attracted the attention of a small crowd of onlookers. They kept a respectful distance, and after each play the ones in the front ranks would turn and whisper the latest happenings to those behind them.

Sir Margus glanced toward the spectators and smiled faintly, as if amused by a secret joke. Then he revealed his sixth plaque. Madame Belldray gasped and clutched at the golden brocade of her gown with a plump hand when she saw a white sigil.

Sir Margus fixed Lord Dolph with a piercing gaze, holding the baron's eyes as the young Velunese knight slowly displayed his next plaque. Several of the onlookers voiced subdued cheers when the second dragon in the stack appeared—that could stand for the green sigil exposed in Madame Belldray's tableau. Now, the young nobleman had completed the Mage, a nearly unbeatable display!

"I believe it is your play, baron," Sir Margus said laconically, without looking down.

Livid, Lord Dolph reached for his next tile. It was the elf—no help. Hurriedly, he turned the next, another tower, and it was time to consider the stakes. "A plate, I say, and be damned!" His hand shook as the paunchy baron put the coin into the pot with an angry toss. Madame Belldray yielded her tableau; she could no longer hope luck would save her. The cleric and the Velunese knight put platinum lozenges into the pot without ado. Guildmaster Arentol observed the whole affair with fascination.

"Istus! That's *five* towers you now face!" roared the baron as his sixth plaque turned out to be another of the castle symbols. Lord Dolph's tableau was now supreme on the board. His florid countenance was wreathed in smugness as he looked from High Priest Vronstein to Sir Margus, his pale eyes red-rimmed but gloating.

"Calmly, dear baron, calmly," admonished the haughty-faced cleric as he carefully exposed his fifth tile. The blue horse's head was some help, but not much, especially in the face of five towers. "I must trust in the divine direction I now require," he stated. He flipped an orb into the air and let it fall on the table before him. It showed a throne. "Tops, so I am to go on. Consider the gold piece my fresh wager," he said.

Neither of the other players increased this sum, so the cleric continued his play. His sixth tile was yet another war-piece, a black sword. After a moment of hesitation, perhaps for silent prayer, Vronstein revealed his seventh and last plaque. It was, incredibly, a red horsehead—cavalry.

"I offer you the Allied Host," the cleric said with a casual gesture toward the green infantry pieces and trio of horses. "Is it not the superior of five towers?" Now it was High Priest Vronstein's turn to sit back and watch, for this seemed the end of all hopes for his opponents.

Before Sir Margus could play, Lord Dolph exclaimed, "We're men here, I believe, and it seems time that we showed what we are made of! I say we make an additional wager on who shall have the winning tableau when all plaques are exposed. What say you, Vronstein?" By pointedly ignoring the young knight, Lord Dolph was indicating that he thought Sir Margus would not have sufficient funds—or perhaps the fortitude—to continue. With his Allied Host before him, the cleric acquiesced with a smile. The baron then placed six orbs into the pot.

Even the priest was startled at that, but he reached into his sash and withdrew a like amount, still smiling, but now shaking his head as if saddened by the gambling lust of the others at the table.

Now it was up to Sir Margus—if he met the added stake. He took out a flat purse and upended it before him. Out dropped five coins—four orbs and a plate. He added these to his stack of five luckies on the table, but he was still short of the wager. Desperately, the young man dug in his tunic breast pocket, there finding three more electrum coins. He sat back with dejection on his face.

"Well, sir, now, sir!" crowed the baron. "You seem to be a single lucky short of making the six orbs additional wager. By the rules of play you now stand forfeit!"

In desperation, the Velunese knight looked around the table at the others. "Will one of you kind folk, nobles all, not lend me a single lucky so that I may continue the test?" he asked in a friendly tone. Stony eyes and hard faces were the only reply to this.

Then, just as Lord Dolph was about to demand once again that he yield his tiles, the knight held up his hand and snapped his fingers. "Why, how foolish of me!" he exclaimed. "In the heat of the play I seem to have forgotten all about my joss-piece!" With that he shoved his chair back, tugged off the tooled leather boot from his left foot, and tipped the thing upside down over his hand. He placed a worn electrum coin on top of the others, pushed the stack into the pot, and said offhandedly, "My play, I suppose…."

The knight's seventh tile was black, and the last of the sigils in the stack—a great coup indeed! "My tableau now displays the Arch-Mage, bettering His Reverence Vronstein's Allied Host," announced Sir Margus, "and your five towers as well, baron—unless you can best it with that single plaque you have yet undisclosed."

The face of Lord Dolph turned nearly purple, and he sputtered as he reached for the tile.

"Now you, sir, hold, sir, I say!" the Velunese knight commanded. "You have belittled me without stint since this game began. You have tested my temper, my purse, and my spirit. Now let us test yours. I have no coin left, but here upon my finger is a ring of bright gold with the fair green of a cat's-eye chrysoberyl peering forth—a family treasure of value both sentimental and otherwise. Though it is worth far more, let us say it has the

value of a mere three orbs. If you have mettle, sir, you will accept this additional stake ere you turn your final tile."

No noble could turn from such a challenge, though Lord Dolph would doubtless never forgive the challenger. He glared with open hatred at the young Velunese. "You say it has greater value? Then so be it. I wager three plates, not three orbs, against it!"

"Turn your tile then, baron, and may the better man win."

The plaque bore the grinning face of the thief. Baron Dolph had lost.

Later, in a lavish suite at the Villa Noblesse, three young people were laughing and drinking, toasting the occasion with heady, sparkling violet wine from Ulek's southern region. A pile of gold discs, platinum rectangles, and electrum coins were arrayed as a centerpiece.

"You're absolutely crazy, Gord!" said the curvaceous 1e-line. "I thought I'd faint when you couldn't meet the baron's extra stakes…. And then the ring—marvelous!"

"Marvelous? Perhaps," interjected the tall blond youth called Sunray. "Yet I must know how you thought you'd turn that sigil!"

"I cheated," Gord said without inflection.

"What?" cried Teline, laughing and reaching over to hug him. "How could you have cheated? The silly Madame Bell-dray dealt the plaques!"

"I'm good. No one saw me, but I changed the last plaque dealt to me for one I chose—the black sigil."

"With the guildmaster at the table?"

"Oh, so what, Teline?" Sunray chimed in. "Big deal. Everyone was watching the coins tossed into the pot." It was obvious that Sunray was trying to steal the limelight from Gord-Margus, jealous of his success and the attention it gained him from their female companion.

"But, even so, how did he know that Lord Dolph didn't have the fifth tower?" Teline demanded, addressing Sunray and then looking to Gord.

Gord smiled his most boyish grin at her and simply said, "I didn't."

Chapter 9

It had been more than two years now since Gord had left the university and come to the northern portion of Grey-hawk, moving back and forth from High to Garden Quarter as his whim, or opportunity, dictated. In one guise or another, Gord had plied his profession as thief among the most wealthy and powerful citizens of the city without a qualm. Never once had he been detected, although suspicion occasionally had forced him to retire one persona and assume a new one.

By choosing carefully and striking infrequently, he had kept the officials of the city guessing as to what was going on. A great many of his operations had been so well-conceived and well-executed that the victims were left unaware that they had been swindled, cheated, or robbed. The game earlier this week, for instance: Three orbs could support a man modestly for a year, and Gord had virtually stolen more than ten times that much from the other players.

Teline, Sunray, and Gord were part of an active, loosely associated group who plied the arts and crafts of thievery without license from the Guild or acknowledgment of the Guild's authority. It should go without saying that no portion of their illicit gains crossed the palms of the Guild leaders, and thus no funds from these operations came into the coffers of the city and its officials.

Thievery was at best a dangerous profession, for despite the influence of the Guild and the implicit sanction of its actions ,by the officials of Greyhawk, the laws were still the laws. A thief caught in the act was subject to a range of punishment going from bondage all the way to execution in various horrible ways. However, members of the Guild were safe from prosecution so long as they avoided discovery on the job, reported their activities afterward, and paid their tithe. Disgruntled citizens seeking retribution had little recourse against the Guild, save personal challenge or the hiring of an assassin. Vendettas involving the Thieves' Guild were not healthy pursuits.

Outside the Guild, however, a thief had no protection. In fact, both victim and Guild, with the full cooperation of the city, sought to bring such "criminals" to "justice." Of course, this just made things more exciting for the rebellious thieves who elected to operate outside all boundaries.

Most of the non-Guild activity was not robbery or burglary, although there was enough of that. The majority of these operations were of the sort

that Gord had just enacted, involving impersonation, cheating, fraud, and the like. Few such swindles were detected, and few of those detected were talked about, but there was still plenty of heat upon the swindlers from both the Guild and the law-enforcement arm of Grey-hawk. The perpetrators were actively sought, their fences hunted, their accessories held as guilty as the actual perpetrators. This made the group a tightly knit fraternity—cautious, clever, and close-mouthed. Some operated only in the upper sector of the New City, some only in the lower, rougher districts, but all were aware of each other, by reputation at least. Gord's favorite pseudonym was The Grand Count—a title that played on his size, his impersonation of noblemen, and the size of his gains—although lately he had been partial to his newly developed masquerade as one Sir Margus. In point of fact, the take from gambling was small compared to the profit from many of his other operations, and the proceeds from his recent triumph were enough to support Gord and his two associated thieves for no more than a month, living in the high style they favored.

Gord had changed but little since the day he'd quitted the pursuit of knowledge and resumed his profession. By then, at the age of sixteen, he had grown to some five and one-half feet in height, and his skinny frame had filled out with lean muscle. His beard had been heavy and dark then too, and his voice surprisingly deep for one with such slight build. His skill at disguise and acting enabled him to appear younger or older as he desired. Now, Gord could be a lad of fifteen or sixteen, or a young man in his early twenties, according to need.

Ever since his first introduction to disciplined physical exercise, he had grasped its vital importance to his continued success, and Gord never abandoned the routine of workouts and rigorous effort. And he had made an effort to keep improving himself in other ways as well, gaining instruction and information from whatever source was available. Gord was a quick study and a good student in all ways. His gray eyes showed that he took things seriously, and that he had purpose. He was never satisfied that he had learned enough about some subject, although he understood that he must sometimes abandon one course in order to examine another more fully.

Of all his studies in Clerkburg, Gord had most hated to give up the weapon work. Returning for regular sessions to the university district would have been impossible; but, of course, there were other weaponmasters in Greyhawk, so Gord had managed to continue his learning. The problem was

that each change of identity required a change of tutor. Appearances might deceive, but never fighting style. Any swordmaster who had engaged in weaponplay with Gord would recognize his style blindfolded, in a manner of speaking. That he would soon run out of instructors bothered Gord not a little.

Teline had not committed herself to either Sunray or himself, and that bothered Gord far more. His concern came from the friction it caused between them as much as from his desire for her, and that was the truth. Gord had pondered the situation at length. There were plenty of other beautiful and talented women in Greyhawk. He wanted Teline, but if she chose Sunray over him, that would be an acceptable turn of fate, and he could look elsewhere for companionship.

It seemed that feline enjoyed the rivalry too much to make a choice, however, and the resulting strain upon the two young men was eroding the mutually beneficial relationship they had all enjoyed in the past. The three of them used to do everything together, but now either Sunray or Gord was alone half the time. Gord planned capers for himself and Teline, and Sunray likewise developed adventures that left Gord on the outside. Gord had been left alone on this night, actually, and had been none too pleased with the fact. Thus, he acted a bit rashly in once again donning his Sir Margus guise and venturing forth to see what delights the night might hold.

No linkboy was needed to light the streets in High Quarter. Cressets and lamps hung from its buildings made the streets bright enough. No escort was necessary either, for the broad thoroughfares were well-patrolled by the Watch and observed by many private guards in addition. Gord had no need for either torchbearer or protector, having grown up in the darkness and danger of the Old City's worst sections, but as a Velunese knight of few years and unknown capabilities visiting the metropolis of Greyhawk, he would have been obliged to have them for show had the quarter been anything other than it was. He determined to stay within the warmly illuminated avenues of the place, and to stray neither into its more dimly lit, seductive byways nor beyond its boundaries. With him, as always, was the small sword of finest craftsmanship, which he had disguised with gold wire and gewgaws to appear the trapping of a dandy rather than a weapon, and his familiar old dagger and knife. The former, also embellished, hung at his right hip; the latter was nestled out of sight in his boot. His purse contained a total of five orbs value, in various types of coin—enough for fun and

sportive gaming. The remainder of his winnings, and the rest of other successes too, was cleverly hidden as usual. Not even Sunray or Teline knew where he secreted this wealth. Damn them both! He would have his amusement without further thought of either.

Avoiding the Patricians' Club, the establishment in which he'd outfoxed Lord Dolph, he walked away from The Citadel toward the less prosperous section where High and Garden Quarters met. There was more excitement to be had there, and less risk posing as a Velunese. It was unlikely that he'd run into anyone thereabouts who knew Sir Margus. He strolled toward the door of the Nymph and Satyr, selected it as a good place to begin, and in a minute was seated and quaffing his first tankard, casually observing the clientele.

"Sir Margus, how pleasant to find you here!" The voice from just behind his shoulder startled Gord, for he usually detected any nearby presence—a sixth sense, almost. He turned hurriedly to cover his confusion. It was Arentol, and the guildmaster was smiling slightly.

"I was just speaking of your marvelous success the other evening," he said. "Allow me to introduce my associate to you, for he was fascinated by the tale." Arentol turned and beckoned. From the shadow of a nearby pillar stepped someone Gord knew well.

"Master San of Warwell, may I present Sir Margus of the noble Velunese House of Leewes. Sir Margus, Master San."

Gord kept his eyes fixed on his old friend's face, but San never showed a hint of recognition. Blandly, San responded, "An honor indeed, sir," and gave a slight bow.

Arentol was not finished. "Come and join us at our table, please! We two are poor company, but we offer fine drink and a willing ear for your stories of far Veluna and your travels." The guildmaster was all warmth and smiles as he touched Gord's arm and gestured in the direction of his table across the room.

"It will be my distinct pleasure, Honorable Guildmaster—and master… San? Yes. Yes, by all means!" said Gord with equal friendliness, moving with them. "Let us share a cup or two, and I shall gladly tell you all about my wonderful homeland and the exciting adventures I have experienced since leaving that fair place." Gord gave both fellows an ingenuous smile. "Serving maid!" he cried out as they reached the table. "We need your ministrations here!"

If the Lord of Greyhawk's head thief thought to test Gord on his knowledge of Veluna and the lands around, he had not reckoned with that worthy's previous schooling. While Gord had never been more than a mile beyond the walls that encircled the city, he had spent many hours reading history, studying geography, and hearing lectures on such faraway places. Perhaps Arentol thought San's smiles were due to the elaborate lengths Gord went to in the near-monolog that ensued, or perhaps he attributed the cheerfulness to the young man's ability to storytell. Gord knew that his old chum was secretly laughing deep inside as Gord related, nearly word for word, what both had heard from a particularly dry and windy professor. Gord intermixed a bit of his own fanciful creations withal, but the context was unmistakable.

Finally, after nearly two hours, and many draughts of the most expensive liquor the establishment offered, Arentol broke in. "And that ring on your finger? As I recall, you said it was a valuable family heirloom when you wagered it at the game."

"Ring?" Gord allowed his gaze to move idly to the piece of jewelry on his finger as his mind raced. He had underestimated the guildmaster. A mistake.

"You mean this?" he said, holding up the chrysoberyl and moving it slightly so that the large green cat's-eye winked back and forth in the light. "Great Pholtus, no! This trantlum is no family treasure, I mean." Gord used his utmost duplicity to make the whole sound like indifferent and demeaning speech.

"Odd," commented the Guildmaster, "I'd have sworn that you said it was a treasure. No matter…. But if it is no family heirloom, wherefrom came it?"

"Aha! You're on to it, clever fellow. It is worth a bit of coin, and it does mean much to me. You guessed at the tale, so now I shall relate it for you!"

At first the guildmaster seemed interested, but after several minutes of preamble, he began to shift restlessly in his seat. He politely suggested that Gord get to the point. Gord assured him he was doing that, and then the young man went on to tell of a meeting with a devious gypsy and his band of sullen cutthroats, how they had tried to first dupe, then overwhelm him, and how he had finally slain the leader in single combat, thus gaining the ring.

At this, Arentol grumbled softly and abruptly excused himself to go to the jakes. After letting a couple of minutes pass in silence, San spoke.

"You've put him off, Gord," he murmured with his flagon held before his mouth. "He's suspicious of you now, and he'll never stop until he finds out for sure, one way or another, whether you are who you claim to be."

San cast a glance over his shoulder, checking to see if Arentol was on his way back to the table, while he waited for a response. Clearly nervous for himself as well as for his friend of old, he faced Gord again and with sad eyes gave him a last, whispered piece of advice. "You'd best get out of Greyhawk—while you can!"

Gord smiled but drained his cup instead of replying. The guildmaster returned, and within moments thereafter Sir Margus graciously took his leave.

Teline found the note first and read it aloud to Sunray: "My dear friends, I am so sorry I must leave without proper farewell, but a messenger from my family has brought me news that I am urgently required in Veluna. Do visit if you ever should come there! Your most loving servant, Margus."

"What is this shit?" demanded Sunray.

Teline looked up from the note, her face contorted in anger. "The bastard has skipped with everything!" she shrieked.

That was a lie. Gord had left a pair of luckies next to the note.

Chapter 10

"Furl that sodomized sail, you mudsucking shitfoot!" The captain was not one to mince words, especially in the middle of a vicious storm.

"Aye, aye, cap'n!" Gord replied, tearing at the flapping canvas. He was near to being blown off the barge by the combined force of wind and sail, nearly blinded by the sheets of driven rain, and exhausted, but he obeyed as well as he could.

"Well, move your blasted buns then! How in hell can I save us all from visitin' the bottom with the likes of you crewin' this tub?!"

Gord had the sail in hand now, and several others of the Rhennee crew were helping him to secure it with stout lines so that it wouldn't break loose again.

"Avast there, you blasters!" Gord heard the captain shouting in a bellow that managed to defeat the howl of the storm. "We need that gaff sail to keep her headed—" and then a shrieking blast of wind tore away the rest of the sentence.

Finished with the securing of the lug sail, he and the others hurried to the hatchway and ducked below deck. Gord didn't envy the man on the tiller, the watch, or the captain during times like these. Conditions in the cramped, pitching below-deck area weren't wonderful, but at least it was warm and dry.

After he left his farewell note at the Villa Noblesse, Gord had headed for the River Quarter. Without conscious effort, he took precautions so that his journey would go unnoticed and he would not be trailed by some agent of Arentol. After entering the district of sailors, longshoremen, and teamsters, he made doubly certain by taking specific measures designed to lose any follower, then he backtracked a bit just for extra insurance. He had left all of his fancy garments behind, and his current apparel was unremarkable. No sense in taking chances, he thought, and went one step further. A bit later, Gord strode through the Wharfgate clad as a riverman, sea-bag on his shoulder, soft cap pulled low on his forehead to help hide his features, ring nowhere to be seen.

It had been easy to locate a Rhennee "lord" willing to take on a working passenger. Gord simply approached a likely candidate, standing on the dock beside his barge, and made his request while gesturing in a signal from the secret language of the Rhennee folk. The bargemaster was surprised, but

had not asked any questions, and overcharged Gord by only a few coppers. He introduced himself as Miklos.

The barge had sailed that same day, beating slowly up the Selintan River, headed for the ports of call of the Nyr Dyv and beyond. Going upriver on such a craft was easy, if somewhat tedious. The barge was some six paces or so wide and not quite four times as long. Although it had a shallow draft, less than a fathom unless heavily loaded, so as to enable it to navigate shallow waters and be easily beached, it was equipped with a pair of side keels that were lowered to stabilize the craft when it sailed in deeper waters. The freeboard was quite high, and the rails planked stoutly for protection. The roundish bottom was planked over, as was the beck, to provide a secure space for cargo and crew, the latter being the "family" of the captain. The master, being "lord" of the barge, dwelt in an abovedeck cabin abaft.

Smaller versions of this sort of barge had but a single mast. This Gord had observed during his stay with the Rhennee years ago. Being one of the larger sort, however, the barge of Miklos had a small mizzenmast as well as the stout foremast. There were nearly two dozen souls aboard, only about half of whom were adults—but all but babes in arms had duties to perform, as Gord learned immediately. Everyone, it seemed, was expected to take a turn at the sweeps when the air was calm or the wind foul.

Eventually they had left the banks of the Selintan behind and sailed out onto the deep blue of the Lake of Unknown Depths. When they left the green shores of the river astern, Gord had seen the crew getting out their armament. From below came scorpions, heavy crossbows, and jugs of lamp oil. The scorpions, huge crossbowlike engines designed to propel heavy missiles as large as lances nearly two furlongs, were set into their sockets at bow and stern. The normal crossbows were stowed near swivels mounted on the scantlings, or planked side rails. Missiles for both were likewise kept in side lockers against the time of their need. Finally, the oil pots were secured in netting along both starboard and port beams. One of the crewmen had informed Gord that the oil would be used in emergencies only—such as when some sea monster attacked and could not be driven off by any other means. The oil would be dumped upon the attacking creature, and in the surrounding water, and a torch set to all. The fire risk to the barge was obvious to even so green a lakefarer as Gord.

At first the Nyr Dyv's azure waters had been as calm as a tranquil pool. Gord had not known how fortunate he had been then. Cursing the lack of

wind, he had taken his turn rowing, unaware of the possible alternatives. When the wind began gusting next day, he had first thought himself blessed, but by that evening the heavy pitching and rolling of the barge had made him awfully, terribly sick. The night had been sheer torture, but next morning was worse. The wind howled around him at near gale force. The cold was acute, which caused him to shiver and made him feel even worse.

As bad as Gord felt, it occurred to him that the vessel seemed to be even sicker then he was. Its rigging shrieked as sails and lanyards were stressed to their limits. The barge tossed, and seemed likely to founder at any moment. Then Gord stopped thinking about his own misery as the storm struck in full force and the wind got even stronger. He had to do so many things that he forgot his seasickness.

Now that things were well secured above, he was able to rest for a bit here below deck. He dropped into his hammock and fell asleep quickly, despite the motion, smell, and noises from the children and adults also in the place. It seemed that he had just closed his eyes when a hand was shaking him awake again—time to take his turn bailing. The scow seemed to be full of leaks, but of course it was simply the strain of the rough weather upon her boards.

The Rhennee were clever folk, Gord observed. A system of pulleys and ropes was set up so as to make bailing the barge more efficient. One or two of the crew worked at emptying the bilge with leather buckets. The contents of these they poured into a trough that slanted to where the pulley system was. Another crewman—a child, actually—stationed there opened and closed a gate to fill buckets circling the cogs. Each canvas vessel tipped its contents out into another trough that ran from barge to lake through the cabin window. Collapsed, the bucket returned and was soon beneath the trough ready for another outpouring. While a lot of the water spilled to the planks and returned to the bilge, most of it was emptied thus. Two women operated the lifting rig, and Gord was one of three men now plying buckets to empty the bilge. It was back-breaking work.

The spring tempest died suddenly around noon. It had driven the barge well out into the Nyr Dyv and caused a fair amount of damage to hull and rigging. The small boat that had been towed astern was gone, lost who knew where. The Rhennee set to work immediately repairing the damage, running new cords and lines, and setting up the artillery with new strings and ropes. The captain was everywhere, ordering this, commanding that,

and taking a personal hand whenever things didn't look right to him. The craft was under full sail now, running southeast toward the shore some ten leagues distant according to Yanoh, a fellow of about Gord's own age. How he knew this, Gord had no idea.

"Why are dry strings being put on the crossbows? Why are the quarrels being set out?" Gord asked.

Yanoh grinned. "The monsters like to check the surface after a big storm —lots of good stuff for them to eat then!" he said.

Gord suddenly felt sick again. No wonder "lord" Miklos was in so much of a hurry to make the coast. The deep waters were certainly no place to be now! He redoubled his efforts at readying the weaponry, simultaneously regretting his decision to travel by water. All to no avail—the worst happened almost immediately.

"Ahoy! Cap'n Miklos, critter off the stern and coming fast!" The warning came from the boy posted by the tiller watching for… critters?

It was some critter, Gord thought, as he got his first look at the looping coils and huge head of the monster chasing the vessel. Critter, indeed!

The spear-casting machine at the rear of the barge was already being loaded and wound back even as Gord stood and stared at the creature. So this was one of the dreaded sea serpents he had heard about. It was now about two hundred yards distant, coming closer with each heaving motion of its snaky body, with toothy maw agape. To Gord, its mouth seemed large enough to bite the stern clean off the barge.

Miklos shoved the gawking young man aside so that he could get to the scorpion and aim it himself. Gord came out of his shock and followed. Somebody handed him one of the wood-varied missiles for the great crossbow. Gord took it with him to a place near the captain. The monster had closed to about one hundred fifty yards now. Miklos peered intently along the shaft of the missile, a lanyard in his left hand, his right moving the scorpion so that the barbed iron spearhead pointed directly at the oncoming creature.

Miklos suddenly twitched his left hand, the steel arms of the scorpion sprung forward, and the pointed lance flashed out with a deep twanging sound. *To* Gord's untrained eye, the missile seemed to appear magically protruding from the monster's neck, a couple of feet below its head.

"Got the snaky sonofabitch!" shouted the helmsman.

The thing let forth a bellowing hiss that would have deafened anyone close to it. At just over one hundred yards distant, it was awesome. A crewman snatched the missile Gord was stupidly holding onto as he gawked, transfixed by the sight of the creature. The crewman hastily loaded the great lance into the scorpion while cursing Gord for being a fool, and worse. Gord, shame overcoming his terror for a moment, could not disagree. Within seconds the big machine was again loaded and winched taut, and the captain was aiming the second missile.

"This time you eat my toothpick, stinking shit-mouth!" Miklos shouted as he shot the huge bolt at the serpent. The missile struck the head, but the thing was covered with thick scales as large as Gord's hand. These scales turned the point, and the shaft caromed off into the air. A swarm of buzzing quarrels from the heavy crossbows followed the larger bolt, and most of these likewise inflicted no apparent harm upon the creature, although a few struck home.

Gord was appalled to note that the thing was now close enough for him to clearly see the shafts protruding from its head and neck. It was a blackish-green in color, with large, fishy eyes. Its snakelike body was propelled by lashing tail and huge fins. The monster's neck was at least twenty feet long, and its head was like a cross between a snake's and a crocodile's. How could so many teeth fit into one mouth, Gord wondered, and how could they be so large? The monster was at least a hundred feet long! Instinctively, he drew his long dagger and hefted it. If he was going to be dinner for the thing, at least he'd give the bastard something to remember him by.

Another missile from the scorpion struck the great serpent full in its open mouth. It roared again, snapped its jaws shut, and spat out bits of splintered shaft. Yellowish blood oozed from its mouth, too—this missile had done some damage! More quarrels struck it, and several javelins too, but the serpent's advance was not slowed. The captain was doing his best to manage one more shot from the scorpion before the monster fell upon the barge and destroyed it. Women were screaming somewhere behind Gord, and children were wailing at the top of their lungs. What was going to happen next was obvious to all.

The monster was no more than twenty yards distant when Miklos got his last missile ready and aimed. He released it without hesitation, almost as if he wasn't bothering to aim. The bolt struck the creature's eye directly in the

center of the huge, green pupil. The resulting bellow of pain from the monster drowned out all other sounds, and its rush for the barge took on new energy.

As it came so close that its reeking breath and slimy stench nearly overwhelmed Gord, he hurled his dagger with every ounce of strength he had, aiming for the serpent's remaining eye. A virtual cloud of quarrels, javelins, and other missiles accompanied the dagger, for this was the last moment before doomsday. As if in slow motion Gord saw his weapon turning lazily in the air, pommel under, blade over, slowly revolving to present the slender point to the onrushing eye. Shafts of quarrels and javelins protruded as pins from a cushion, for at this range it was difficult to miss, and the scales were less effective protection.

Then the dagger met its target. At the same moment the monster's neck lashed forward and its great jaws snapped. A hapless Rhennee was cut in half by the saw-edged teeth, and blood spattered everywhere.

What happened next, Gord wasn't sure of. The serpent collided with the barge, and the force of the impact hurled him from his feet. Gord's head struck something, and the next thing he knew he was being ministered to by a fat woman whose breath reeked of garlic. When he asked what was happening, she said only that they were in a safe harbor, and he should rest. Gord had no choice in the matter, for he abruptly passed back into unconsciousness.

A few days later Gord was up and around, feeling fine. Yanoh told him all about the conclusion of the matter. Blinded, the sea serpent could do little but thrash about erratically in its efforts to destroy its victims. The initial impact had badly damaged the stern of the barge, but it had also sent the vessel shooting away, even as the shock of its wounds had caused the monster to recoil. Two of the Rhennee had been killed by the collision—one crushed to death by the serpent's massive body, the other overboard and drowned, probably—in addition to the unfortunate who was caught in the monster's jaws.

Everyone not holding fast to something and braced had been thrown flat by the force of the creature hitting the vessel, but in a moment most of the crew were back on their feet and shooting again. Was the serpent mortally wounded by them? They would never know, for its writhing and splashing on the surface had attracted something else. Yanoh had seen something

huge and dark rise beneath the sea serpent, and then the wounded monster had suddenly been jerked beneath the ochre-stained waves. Gone without a trace!

Everyone aboard was happy that whatever could take it so easily was satisfied with that meal. They'd patched the stern sufficiently to allow them to make for shore and safety in Caverncliff Cove, one of the secret places the bargefolk wintered in. The small bay was on the eastern tip of the land that surrounded Nyr Dyv's Midbay. The vessel had made port without further trouble, and had been there for a week.

It astonished Gord to learn that he'd been unconscious for so long, but he wasn't worried. His head was sore where it had been gashed, and he knew that his scalp would always bear the scar of the encounter. He did feel pride in having been part of the fight against the monster, and that his own skill with the dagger had been vital to the survival of the whole Rhennee "family" aboard the barge.

Because of that skill, Gord now had a place of honor in the group. Everyone—Gord included—seemed to have forgotten about his gawking and his hesitation during the early stages of the battle, and the bargers enthusiastically acknowledged him as an adopted member of the Rhennee tribe. There were only five other barges at the place, for with the advent of warm weather most of the bargefolk had set forth on their travels. Those five, however, joined in the celebration Miklos held.

At his first opportunity, Gord asked the lord of the barge for more information about the creature that had come so near to finishing them all.

"What do you call those things, anyway?" he inquired.

"Big bastards," Miklos replied.

"No, I mean, what is its actual name?"

"Shit, I've never seen anything like it before!" Miklos responded. "Nor as big as that, either."

Gord didn't feel quite so cocky after that short exchange. He realized fully that a lot of good luck had assisted them, and their missiles had been only a part of it. Anyway, he was still alive to tell about it—and that was the important thing. With that, he dismissed the whole affair and concentrated on the celebration.

There was all sorts of food and drink, singing, music, and dancing. Gord scrutinized all of the younger women, thinking that chance might have it

that Adaz, the girl he'd met and liked as a boy when he first stayed with the Rhennee, would be among the folk from the other barges.

There were several strikingly pretty girls in the crowd, and all returned his scrutiny with bold looks. This, in turn, brought him black looks from any number of the men there, and when he noticed this Gord quickly quit his flirting. A fight would not be the way to end a feast celebrating victory over a sea monster and his adoption into the bargefolk tribe. But, even though he now kept his eyes elsewhere, and conversed only with the men around him, the damage had been done. As Gord was lifting his goblet to drink more of the harsh red wine the Rhennee favored, it was struck from his hand.

"On your feet, dog! Now that you are one of us, I can challenge you to the test of the blades!"

A tallish, muscular fellow stood before him, legs spread in an aggressive posture. "Piss off!" countered Gord. "Why should I want to fight you?"

"Are you a coward?" the Rhennee replied, shouting. "All saw the way you looked at Estrella—and the way she returned your lustful gaze! She's my woman! Honor demands that I fight you for her—now!"

Just as he was about to suggest that the fellow bugger his honor and go pick a fight with his woman, Miklos stood up and shouted back at the challenger.

"Are you calling the family of Miklos curs? Are you saying that we have no pride? Pig!" He bent down, grabbed Gord by his blouse, and pulled him upright. "He will fight, and he will teach you manners!"

"Crap…" said Gord under his breath.

"What was that?" demanded Miklos.

"I said that that man is a craphead and a stinking yellow mongrel who cannot beat even a large child in a fair fight," Gord hastily replied.

"Good! Teach him a lesson!" shouted the captain, even as Gord's opponent was reaching grimly for the dagger on his wide belt. Gord could feel the celebrants in the immediate area moving back to make an arena for the impending fight.

Too bad for Gord that he had only his small sheath knife. The great dagger he had thrown into the sea serpent's orb was somewhere in the waters of the lake—or, more probably, lodged in the intestines of some leviathan. According to the test of the blades, which he had heard about

from his barge-mates, Gord must face his opponent with whatever weapon he had. At least its point was sharp and its edge keen.

"Be careful, brother!" hissed Miklos, speaking nearly in Gord's ear so that the others nearby could not hear. "Zoltan is young, but he is one of the best daggermen in the whole tribe."

Gord heaved a long sigh. "Thank you, my lord," he replied sarcastically, out of the corner of his mouth. The remark was lost on Miklos, for he had turned away and was already busy with the active betting going on.

Someone came out of the crowd with a leather thong and tied it to the left wrists of the combatants so that they were separated by about a yard when the cord was stretched taut. In the instant after this man stepped back, Zoltan swept his dagger through the space between them. Gord reacted well, but not quickly enough to prevent Zoltan's blade from tracing a stinging path across the front of his blouse, breaking the skin beneath but doing him no great harm. So, thought Gord, this is how we begin!

As he circled his opponent warily, Gord could just barely distinguish the voices shouting out the odds. In the space of the few seconds following Zoltan's opening swipe, they had risen from seven to two all the way to ten to one—in Zoltan's favor. Even though concentrating hard on the matter at hand, Gord could not help but feel indignant at that. Hell, one little slash across his belly didn't mean he'd lost the duel!

The rules of the ritual dictated that if either combatant cut the tie that held them together, then that person was considered the loser and must either pay the winner a dozen silver nobles or be outcast. Gord actually considered slashing the thong and ending the contest, for what did a few coins mean? But the backing of his new "family" kept him at it. Gord assumed that they had wagered everything they owned on him, judging from their shouts of encouragement and their catcalls about Zoltan's ability. He had to go on, even though it looked bad. Miklos expected him to prove himself worthy.

The years of schooling he had undergone would now be put to a real test. These conditions were almost the same as those prescribed in practice matches with less lethal weapons, but he wished they were using swords rather than shorter blades. Gord was a better swordsman than knife fighter, though not by much.

Slash and stab, parry and thrust…. The match went on for minutes, but seemed like it lasted hours. Both contestants were sweating from strain and exertion, but Gord marveled to himself that the tension was not actually

affecting him, and that he was still feeling fresh and ready. He moved with fluid ease and was unwinded. Zoltan, on the other hand, seemed to be tiring a bit. He was panting, and moving his legs as if they were heavy. Interesting…

Gord stepped up the pace with a flurry of feints, movements, and actual attacks, intermixed with much circling designed to keep Zoltan on the move. He was cut twice more in the process, but both wounds were merely scratches, although they must have appeared worse to the audience from the sound of their reactions to the touches. He now heard someone offer odds of a dozen to one, but no cry of acceptance followed. Great!

Now, suddenly, Zoltan carried the fight to him—stamping forward, his blade moving with blurring speed. Gord danced back, parrying wildly, saving himself barely, and taking a cut on his weapon hand in the process. Now his grip would be less sure, for the blood flowing into his palm would make the handle of his small knife slippery. It was certainly time for him to come up with a winning attack or be beaten… and either shamed or killed.

Zoltan was most certainly tired from his furious onslaught. His breathing was labored, and he was gulping air as often as he had the opportunity. When he eased his attack a bit, Gord again countered with his own series of cuts, rushes, and so on. He feigned exhaustion also, and gradually slackened the pace of his offense. The bigger man thought he saw his opportunity and went for it.

Zoltan jumped forward suddenly, body crouched low, right arm looping forward, dagger set for a killing thrust into the kidneys or gut. But Gord wasn't there when the attack ended. He had suddenly leaped back as far as possible, pulling on the leather thong with all his might. Zoltan, off balance, continued forward and fell heavily on his face, his left arm extended by the tie, dagger likewise before him. In a flash Gord leaped atop the man, looped the thong around his neck, and poised his knife at the edge of his throat.

"Who is a dog?" he asked.

"Not my brother Gord!" came the strangled reply from Zoltan.

"I am yours then, Gord!" cried the Rhennee girl Estrella, rushing to his side.

Chapter 11

"What do you mean, I can't give her back?" Gord said with surprise, but in a low voice. "I didn't want her in the first place."

"It would be a mortal insult to Zoltan, Estrella, and the Rhennee code," Yanoh told him. "Every hand would be turned against you if you did."

"But I don't want Estrella—not that she isn't desirable!" Gord hastened to add, casting a glance toward where his prize sat a few paces away. "Why can't I just make a present of her to Zoltan? I could say that I… I've taken a holy vow of celibacy—no women allowed!"

"Stop talking like an outsider, brother Gord of the Rhennee. We have no such silly thing as celibacy amongst the True Folk."

Gord tried another tack. "Zoltan will be my enemy forever unless I return her to him."

"Poo!" Yanoh sniffed. "He's your sworn enemy for life now, that much is true. It would be a good insult to cast Estrella back at him, but that would not soothe Zoltan—and it would bring everyone else down on your head as well. Wait! I have it."

"Have what?" Gord asked, finding it hard to keep the volume and tone of his voice under control.

"The solution, stupid. You can solve the problem easily. Do you have silver? You'll need at least fifty silver pieces to do it."

"Dammit, Yanoh! Do what?"

"Get rid of Estrella and let Zoltan know that you think he is worse than pig shit. All you have to do is kill her. The silver will pay off her family, and—"

At that, Gord was up and gone. He strode over to where Estrella was sitting, took her arm to help her up, kissed her, and marched the beaming Rhennee girl off toward the barge of his "family." This brought a cheer from the assemblage of onlookers, at least those who weren't too drunk by then. Gord resigned himself to his fate: he now had a woman whether he wanted one or not. Zoltan, meanwhile, stood in the background glaring daggers at both. Somehow, thought Gord, the fellow betrayed something more than hatred, however. Was that a hint of relief he saw in those sullen eyes?

Completing repairs and finishing the celebration took another week. The six barges at Cavernclif Cove were joined by several others in the interim, and most of the original ones left within a few days. As surely as if directed by the fates, the first new barge to arrive bore none other than Adaz, his

friend from his earlier days with the Rhennee. She was now mature and more lovely than Gord's remembrance of her. She was delighted to see him too, at first.

"Gord, you have grown so big and strong and handsome!" Adaz cried when they first met. She ran her hand over his muscular arm.

Gord flushed at that and murmured vaguely about having had to do much growing up. "And you, Adaz, you… you… are as beautiful as ever," he finished somewhat lamely.

"Thank you, Gord. I know that you mean it, too. Why else would you have come all the way from Greyhawk just to find me?"

They talked a bit, casually, as Adaz linked her arm in his and steered him toward the community encampment. It was all downhill, in a manner of speaking, after that. When she saw Estrella and learned of the fight with Zoltan, she shunned Gord entirely. That made him sad and furious at the same time.

"Don't worry," Yanoh reassured him. "As soon as you become a chief man in the tribe and you have your own barge, then you can have as many women as you can keep!"

Worst of all, Estrella was a nag and a bitch. She was pretty, but the constant whining tone in her voice drove Gord mad. At every opportunity she was after him to get her presents—jewelry, clothing, any number of things she must have—all of it, she assured him, to enhance Gord's status, of course. When she wasn't on that tack, Estrella was urging him to get rid of Zoltan, challenge Miklos for lordship of the barge, take her to some rich town, and so on and so on and so on. If she caught him looking at Adaz or any of the other young girls, or even thought he might wish to look, she would verbally abuse him or physically attack him, scratching, biting, hitting, and kicking him until he had to subdue her.

"Beat her more frequently," Miklos advised sagely.

Gord was certain that Zoltan was somewhere nearby laughing. Every time he looked up from a scene with Estrella, he saw the fellow's back as he walked away. Zoltan's shoulders were either shrugging or shaking with mirth—and Gord knew there was no reason for him to shrug. In desperation, he sought out his arch-enemy one day when Estrella was busy elsewhere.

"You won, Zoltan," said Gord.

"How well I know that, Gord."

"I don't wish to be your enemy, Zoltan. Let us put this behind us and be friends."

Zoltan did shrug then. "That you did me two great favors is true. You spared my life when it was yours for the taking. And you made it worth living by ridding me of Estrella. I would kiss you if I could, but our custom dictates I must now be your foe. However, you need never worry that I shall again try to kill you, friend Gord, because if I did, that bitch would be mine again!" His darkly tanned face split into a huge laugh at that, head thrown back, white teeth showing.

"You are a funny bastard, aren't you, Zoltan?"

That only made him laugh harder. Gord walked away, while Zoltan fell over on the ground, holding his sides, tears streaming down the sides of his face, lost in helpless gales of mirth. So much for that idea.

Yanoh eventually came up with another suggestion, one that appealed more to Gord than his friend's first idea had. If Gord caught his woman in a compromising position with another of the tribe, he could either demand a duel with the fellow, or else he could insist that the violator take the woman and pay him silver in compensation. How in the devil Gord could manage to find anyone foolish enough to want to have anything to do with the shrewish Estrella was his problem, but there was the solution.

Again fate stepped in and took a hand. Three barges filled with a clan who came only infrequently to this spot arrived the next morning. Wonder of wonders! They contained quite a few handsome young bucks who had never met Estrella, nor heard of her evidently, for they cautiously but frequently shot her concupiscent looks. Gord was careful not to let on that he was noticing. Whatever he did, he did not wish to have to fight yet another duel over her! But he did not want to appear totally unconcerned, so he made a point of glaring at her vigilantly from time to time when she was not, at the moment, involved in flirtation. Estrella, in turn, smiled and winked back at several of the new young men any time she thought Gord was unaware of her.

That night, as the assembled families sat around the evening fires, singing and dancing as usual, Gord pretended to drink much wine. As he grew more boisterous and seemingly in his cups, Estrella encouraged him to drink more and have fun. After an appropriate interval, Gord got up, swaying in his best drunken imitation, and stumbled and staggered off to the bushes to sleep. The sounds of crashing, followed by loud snores, gave Estrella all the

incentive she needed. She quickly moved to where she could talk with the newcomers, especially the handsome young ones.

Gord got up from his berth in the bushes and moved silently to the edge of the clearing, from where he could observe everything. After a short time, one of the newcomers strolled off into the foliage. Minutes later Estrella, trying to move inconspicuously, left the group and took the same path.

That was all Gord needed to see. He made his reappearance, went straight to where Miklos and Yanoh were seated, and whispered something to both of them. They rose and went off with Gord in the same direction Estrella had taken. After creeping carefully through the underbrush for a couple of minutes, the three of them caught Estrella and her lover in the act.

Gord was outraged. He shouted and stormed. Estrella let out a scream, then began to weep and wail. The young Rhennee was pale in the moonlight, for he had heard that Gord was a renowned fighter, and he undoubtedly thought that he would soon demand a duel to the death over the violation of the beautiful Estrella. The young fellow's family gathered quickly, and his "lord" conversed softly with Miklos, talking about the time and place for the fight.

"This is too much!" cried Gord, putting an end to all the talk about fighting. "Never will I cast eyes upon you again, woman!" he spat at Estrella.

Then he turned abruptly to the fellow and added in an almost offhand tone, "Well, where is my silver?"

A couple of days later, richer by twenty-five nobles and the lack of a woman, Gord was aboard Miklos' barge, which was heading along the coast of Nyr Dyv with two other barges. They were bound for Leukish, then Radigast City, and whatever lay beyond. Gord was finally going to see something more of the world besides water.

It was a relief to make their first port, Leukish, without having to face anything on the trip more terrible than a pair of playful giant otters who swam near to see them. Since the animals were no threat to them, the bargefolk simply ignored the otters and sailed on. There was little to do but loaf and fish until they arrived at the southeastern end of Nyr Dyv and put into port. Leukish was a small city compared to Greyhawk, even though it was the largest in the Duchy of Urnst and the capital of the place.

Urnst was a place of rolling green hills, at least based on what Gord had seen from the barge as it passed along the shoreline. The city of Leukish was nestled amidst the surrounding hills, although the section farthest from the port area was built on a low plateau so that it dominated the wide valley around it. The people did not look much different from those in Greyhawk, being a mixture of Oeridians and Suloise, although they dressed quite oddly. Gord thought the long trousers were inferior to the hose typically worn in his home city, and the plaids and checks that the Urnstmen sported seemed either plain or gaudy, depending on the hues and arrangements. Architecture was strange here, too, for the buildings all seemed tall and narrow, with pointy arches and square towers. Columns and pillars were everywhere. Roofs were steeply peaked, as were the tower caps. All in all, he could hardly wait to get into the place and find out just how different it was.

Miklos warned him that the Urnstmen were not fond of Rhennee folk. There had been some trouble in the past, with the Urnstmen claiming that the bargefolk practiced piracy, sneak-raiding, and worse. Some actual battles had been fought, but the whole thing had sort of blown over during the past year. The Duke had troubles elsewhere, and the Rhennee had no wish to try conducting a war with the Duchy.

Gord was instructed that, whatever the circumstances, he should be careful, cautious, and polite during his stay in this territory. He mustn't be caught stealing. Kidnapping was forbidden. Seduction was frowned upon. Gord asked if there was anything else.

"Yes," the bargefolk captain replied. "Give me those silver nobles you extorted from the foolish young fellow who relieved you of Estrella."

"What! Why?" Gord demanded. "Why should I? The cash is mine!"

"I am your family lord," Miklos countered. "Besides, I have no money of my own."

"How could you be penniless?" Gord was truly at a loss.

Miklos stared at the deck. "All the money your family owned was lost betting on Zoltan," he confessed.

The gate guards eyed Gord most suspiciously, asked him a couple of questions in oddly stilted Common, and then allowed him to pass into Leukish. The city was bustling with activity, and Gord simply drifted with the traffic, studying everything he saw. Soon he arrived in a rectangular

marketplace filled with carts and booths. His practiced eye noted that there were no discernible thieves loitering about—although some may have been working; of that he could not be sure. The people here were mostly Urnstmen, with a smattering of outlanders and demi-humans. The goods were typical of such a faire, ranging from all manner of foodstuffs to clothing and household goods.

Knowing that the interesting items would be at the far end near the largest buildings, Gord went in that direction. Sure enough, there were the metalsmiths. After spending a considerable amount of time examining various dirks and daggers, Gord was quite disappointed. The weapons were finely wrought, but they just weren't the equal to the blade he had lost during the battle with the sea monster.

The grizzled seller of weapons at the last stall noted Gord's intensity in examining the poniards, did his best to help by extolling the virtues of each dagger, and then ceased the sales pitch with the following advice:

"You seem, sir, a connoisseur of such blades. These are all excellent dags, but what you seek is not here. I suggest you go to the shop of Hengel. If you can meet his price, you will have your weapon."

"Where is this Hengel's establishment?" asked Gord.

Following the directions of the fellow soon brought Gord to the narrow way leading to a close, as it was described to him. There Gord saw a busy smithy and a shop beside it. The forge was working arrowheads, so he passed immediately into the store. A gnarled old dwarf, of great size for one of his sort, was there polishing weapons with an oily cloth.

"Goodag," he said to Gord. "How to serve a… Rhenneeclad… stranger from… Vild Coste?"

"Greyhawk, actually. I am here for a dagger."

"Yah, sure!" the dwarf exclaimed enthusiastically. "Big, little, long, short, narrow, broad, and more. Ve got dem all. Vhich?"

To simplify the process, Gord launched into a detailed description of his lost dagger. He carefully explained its size, shape, decoration, and balance. When he completed the exposition, the dwarf asked some additional details that surprised Gord, for the fellow was accurate in the suggested conformation and decoration of the weapon.

"Und now der veppon iss… ?"

Gord recounted the tale of the sea serpent's attack and defeat. At the point where he told about casting his dagger into the monster's eye, the dwarf

shook his head sadly. The blade, he informed Gord, was most certainly a magic one, but a weapon designed for demi-humans, not folk such as Gord. Had he only been able to have one for himself, Hengel said, Gord could have had his pick of the other magicked daggers in his place!

"One what?" Gord inquired.

"Oh," said the dwarf sadly, "der longtoothed vun you vas telling about."

Never having heard of a longtoothed one before, Gord found it hard to share the dwarf's sense of sadness, although he keenly regretted losing the dagger and was excited at the prospect of replacing it.

"I'll show vat I do haff," Hengel said. Then he paused in his rush toward a cabinet. "You pay mit gold? Or is der deal to be a trade?" He eyed Gord's clothing suspiciously as he asked these questions.

Without thinking, Gord reached into his sash and drew out the leather bag in which he kept his wealth. His whole attention was so caught by the weapons that he actually shook the bag's contents out onto the counter. The dwarf's eyes fell greedily upon the outpouring, a small pile of platinum and gold, with only a couple of electrum and silver pieces intermixed. Atop all was the cat's-eye ring.

"Zsoo…" Hengel could hardly tear his gaze from the metal. "You haff much vealth for vun zo young!" He finally managed to look up at Gord, avarice filling his eyes with brightness. "Now I show you all!"

Too late to rectify his mistake, Gord thought. What a fool to display the contents of one's purse to anyone—let alone a dwarf! There was no help for it now, and he must be ready for anything.

Hengel had the cabinet open and was hastily rummaging around inside it. He turned, arms loaded with parcels wrapped in velvet. He placed all of them on the counter near Gord's heap of coins, unwrapping each of them quickly but carefully. There were five daggers there, each beautifully fashioned, each in its own sheath.

"You chooz vhich you vant," the dwarf said, "and I tell you how much."

Gord bent over and let his eyes play back and forth over the array, not touching any of them right away. While he was so occupied, Hengel scampered to the door, barred it, and dropped its curtain, saying, "No sense in letting anyvun bodder you vhile you is choozing!"

Gord was ready to grab one of the weapons and defend himself against attack, but the dwarf merely came back to the counter and stared at the coins. When Gord hefted the first of the blades, it began to glow, and he

nearly dropped it in surprise. His exclamation caused Hengel to shift his gaze away from the coins to see what was going on.

"Der longtoothed vun neffer did dat, cause you ain't a demi-hooman," the dwarf said matter-of-factly This short explanation completed, the dwarf returned to his loving contemplation of the money, and Gord resumed inspection of the daggers.

He definitely did not like a weapon that shed light when it was drawn—too much attention there, even though Gord could see advantages to such illumination at times. The second blade was of deep black metal, very sharp and deadly looking, but Gord noticed it had a few tiny pits on it. That one he replaced in its sheath, grateful for his keen eyes, and also set aside as undesirable.

Of the three remaining, all but one glowed when held unsheathed. The last weapon he handled had beautiful balance, and it was almost as large as the one he had lost. Gord noted that its blade was covered with silver-inlaid runes, and his hand tingled slightly when he grasped the dagger and held it in fighting position. He tried a few passes with it, imagining an opponent before him.

"Zuch an eye you haff!" Hengel said. "You hold der best uff my daggers!" His deep brown eyes sad above the great brush of beard, Hengel stared solemnly at Gord and added, "It has der dwveemer zo dat it ignores armor und—"

"What's dwveemer?" interrupted Gord.

"Magick! Shpells und zuch!" the dwarf said a bit crossly. "Don't be shtoopid!"

Hengel's accent was getting worse, Gord thought to himself. He meant *dweomer*, as in dweomercraefter, a spellbinder. The dwarf must be losing his composure because of his fascination with the precious blade in Gord's hand. "Tell me more about this weapon," Gord said firmly.

Hengel took it from him and unceremoniously hurled it at the stone floor. Much to Gord's amazement, the point went in, and the blade buried itself two or three inches deep. The dwarf broke into a faint smile as he beheld Gord's shocked expression, then said: "Schtone, schteel, vateffer, der blade sees only like it vas flesch! Uff magick protections, is another schtory… but demin or deffil is zlized mit easyness! You haff chust enuff here to buy it, too!"

The dwarf was fast, but not as quick as his customer. As Hengel's hand darted for the treasure on the counter, Gord's small knife intercepted it, guarding the ring-crowned pile.

"Not so fast, my friend," said Gord coolly. "I didn't say I wanted to buy it." He looked at the greed written across Hengel's face, shook his head, and continued. "No! At such a cost, I am not at all interested." He scooped his treasure back into his purse, pulled the drawstring shut, and turned for the exit. "I shall look elsewhere…. Good-bye!" he concluded.

"Vait! Schtop!" Hengel cried as Gord's hand started to unbar the door. "Perhaps I vas too kvick in… aah… counting der zum uff your vealth." He thrust himself between customer and door, wringing his large, gnarly hands.

Gord dangled his purse from his left hand, watching the dwarf's eyes following its motion. "Let us bargain further, then," he said, turning back toward the counter.

It took almost half an hour to come to a mutually acceptable price, and Gord was on the verge of walking out twice more before the dwarf finally yielded. Hengel had tried his best to get the cat's-eye ring as part of the deal, but Gord had resisted—all the harder when the dwarf had reduced the number of gold orbs he also asked for in order to gain it. That made the young man very suspicious. The ring must have value beyond gold and gemstone, he thought. Eventually, Gord paid over six orbs—all the gold he possessed.

The dwarf was not interested in platinum, although the plates were more valuable than gold orbs by a tenth. Hengel obviously cared much more about the yellow metal that his kind habitually favored. He was clutching the orbs fervently when Gord departed. Somehow, Gord understood, for he was holding the haft of his new weapon tightly himself. It had cost him dearly to obtain it, and he would treasure it accordingly.

He walked around the area for an hour or so thereafter, stopping in the meantime for some cold food and a flagon of ale at a local tavern, before returning to the marketplace. If anything, the market plaza was more crowded than it had been earlier. Gord was about to hurry through when his eye was caught by a swatch of the brightly colored, telltale garb of the Rhennee. Sure enough, there was Adaz, intent on her study of the wares of a goldsmith's booth. He was merely going to pass without speaking, for he was certain she wouldn't notice him, when her posture alerted him that she was doing something other than browsing. He glanced at the jeweler and

the others nearby, sized up the situation, and moved quickly to the girl's side.

"Don't bother with such inferior trash, Adaz, my sweet!" Gord smiled broadly as he said this and took the girl's arm in his hand. The motion concealed his deft removal of the earrings she had slipped into her sleeve.

Adaz looked up at him, startled, then angry. Before she could utter a word, though, Gord was speaking loudly again.

"Let me see your selection, dear." He took her hand, and as if by magic the purloined jewelry was there. "Just as I said! Far too common and simple for someone so lovely!" Gord tossed them to the startled owner, and the fellow barely caught them. Two other men who had been moving stealthily toward the Rhennee lass also stopped short.

"Now then, fellow, let's see something good. Don't bother with stuff fit for fat merchants' wives!" Gord commanded.

The goldsmith was taken aback, but he countered quickly. "You don't have enough—" he started, then caught himself and reworded his objection. "You didn't say what sum you'd pay. How can I select without knowing the depth of your purse?"

Gord ignored the impertinence. He pointed imperiously at a pair of small but brilliant rubies enmeshed in fine golden wire. "Those, smith, are more to our taste. Fetch them!"

The man brought them to Gord as commanded, but while so doing he jerked his head toward the pair of stalwarts who served as his guards, and they moved to either side of Gord and Adaz. The girl had finally caught the drift of what was going on. She moved closer to Gord and smiled wanly at him. Her olive skin appeared pale.

Without seeming to notice the guards nearby, Gord carefully examined the earrings, allowing the slanting afternoon sunlight to play upon the sparkling facets of the gems, the rays turning them to fiery blazes of crimson. "They are acceptable, but worth no more than a plate," he said as he stared at the proprietor of the booth, face set, eyes narrowed.

"A plate? Hah! A plate *each,* I say! Do you think me a dolt or an idiot?" the fellow shouted back. The haggling began. Gord agreed too quickly to a price of two orbs, handed over two lozenges of platinum, received a pair of luckies in return, and still holding Adaz by her shapely arm strode away. She said nothing, for she knew that Gord had saved her from being arrested

for theft, but that he was furious over what the rescue had cost him. When she ran her free hand over his bicep, Gord didn't respond.

Chapter 12

Radigast City was larger than Leukish, smaller than Greyhawk. Gord's "family" came to the principal place of County Urnst along with a veritable fleet of barges, having sailed from Leukish with seven or eight and then having met and been joined by many others. The convoy was for protection against the pirates who were known to ply the Nyr Dyv between Leukish and Radigast City—and besides, the barge-folk didn't have to worry about antagonizing anyone with this apparent show of force; the Countess of Urnst, who held sway over this principality, had no particular dislike of the Rhennee as did Duke Karall, her cousin who ruled Duchy Urnst. From what Gord could determine, the bargefolk often received fees from Her Noble Brilliancy for spying, intelligence, or actual services of a more military nature. Gord wasn't exactly sure of all that, for nobody spoke directly to the matter, and his questions were never answered.

When the flotilla of barges came to a place near the capital city, they went up a small river mouth, a branch of the Artonsamay's great delta, to Muddich, a large village of some eight or nine hundred souls. The visiting Rhennee always made a point of basing themselves at Muddich and traveling overland to Radigast City, which was only a bit more than a league distant. Perhaps that explained part of the relative friendliness for them that County Urnstmen evidenced.

Before they had taken leave of Leukish, Adaz had been most attentive to Gord. He wasn't certain if the attention was born of gratitude or the fact that she wanted the ruby earrings, which he had kept. But whichever it was, he didn't care. Despite all her overtures, Gord was only coolly polite. He had experienced all he ever wanted of Rhennee womenfolk with Estrella. When they put into Muddich, Adaz tried again to win him over, but Gord managed to slip quickly away.

For the next several days Gord explored Radigast, met and talked with its citizens, and covertly watched the less savory elements of the city at work and play. He would have engaged in some amusements and contributed to the city's economy, but the fact was, he was just about broke. The purchase of his dagger and the earrings, plus the orb he had grudgingly handed over to Miklos, left him with only about four plates to his name. Better off than most—and he realized that—but these days unless Gord had more than a dozen plates in his purse he considered himself strapped. Then an idea

struck him, and he hurried back to the village where his "family" had set up camp.

Gord found Adaz at the edge of the village commons, watching a caravan of covered wains setting up there. When he asked her what was going on, her pretty face contorted into a scowl, and she spat.

"These dogs in the wagons claim to be Rhennee too, but they are Attloi—half-breed nothings, vagabonds, liars, and chicken stealers!"

Filing that away for future reference, Gord smiled and invited her to come with him for some fun in the city. They could leave early tomorrow and make a day of it, seeing what there was, eating, drinking, and who knew what!

"I would love it," she replied, "but I have nothing to wear, and I feel so inferior because of it. A girl must look pretty, you know!" Then Adaz gave him her most appealing glance, and Gord said that perhaps he'd have a gift for her when he picked her up in the morning.

"If it is a nice present, perhaps we won't have to return tomorrow night," she said in a sultry voice.

That it would be a nice present, Gord was certain. Returning or not was a matter to be determined by other than Adaz—except rather indirectly. She had better be prepared for quite a day, he mused.

What Gord had in mind was allowing her to exercise her dubious talents as a pilferer while remaining in the background—and using his own abilities. Thanks to the diversion she would provide, Gord should be able to have a field day. It was a cynical thing to do, but why not? He had become a rather cynical fellow, to say the least.

Plotting, Gord strolled off to where he had established his place near the family camp of Miklos.

Bright and early the next morning, he went to where he'd told Adaz to meet him, and sure enough she was there, smiling. He handed her the earrings.

After being careful to keep her out of trouble during the morning, then plying her with wine in the early afternoon, Gord led his unsuspecting decoy into the area of the city where gem merchants had their shops. Although the wares displayed close to where a thief could attempt snatch-and-run tactics were of little value, their glow and glitter were quite spectacular. Adaz was quickly enmeshed in the place, becoming filled with a growing desire to possess some of the beautiful stones that the pair was

ogling in the shop windows. They actually entered one place and peered intently at the aquamarines, pearls, topazes, and similar stones there. The place had nothing of really exceptional value, but their visit served to further whet the girl's appetite for such baubles.

They exited the shop and moved on a few paces, and then Gord told her that he remembered a brief errand he must take care of. Adaz should continue to enjoy herself by viewing the gemstones while Gord was gone for a bit. They could meet again at the end of the lane, only another few hundred feet up, in half an hour. Adaz readily assented.

After walking rapidly away and turning a nearby corner, Gord counted to thirty, slowly, and then retraced his steps in a leisurely fashion. As he again rounded the corner, he saw Adaz entering a fairly large shop halfway down the lane. He continued in her direction in his most leisurely manner, taking special care to remain unnoticed.

From a vantage point across the street, he watched the Rhennee girl examining the contents of the gem merchant's establishment. It appeared to be a fairly prosperous shop, although not the one he had hoped she would choose. Well, never mind—he would make the best of it. Adaz had been busy in the short time she'd been in the place, Gord noted, as he strolled closer. There were quite a few different stones on the counter, and Adaz was pointing to her earrings and gesturing disdainfully at the loose gems. She was probably demanding to see larger rubies to match those on her ears.

Gord turned partially away from the small glass panes of the shop window, pretending to watch the scattered traffic passing by, perhaps awaiting someone, but surveying the interior of the shop out of the corner of his eye. After another few minutes, Adaz thought she had created a sufficiently confused situation and acted. While she was decrying the terrible quality of the stones she had been shown, the girl used her hidden left hand to take a large spinel. The offended merchant didn't notice immediately, for by then the two were exchanging rather vile insults. As she marched in mock outrage for the door, however, the man came to his senses and took an inventory with his eyes. Of course he noticed that the spinel was not there, and he voiced an angry shout.

Adaz broke into a run and was outside the place as its owner vaulted over the counter, shouting at the top of his lungs.

Because Gord stood to the right of the door, Adaz scooted left and away as fast as she could, not recognizing him in her haste to make good her theft

and escape. Gord stayed planted as the shopkeeper came out and turned left in hot pursuit. It reminded him of his old days in the Slum Quarter, and he chuckled softly to himself. Then he stepped into the shop, drew his dagger, and vaulted the counter.

A large, brawny youth, probably the owner's son or apprentice, was just coming through the curtain as Gord landed. The sound of Gord's pommel striking the unsuspecting fellow's head had a hollow sound, and the blow felled him like a steer at slaughter. Empty head or not, it would be sore for the next few days, thought Gord, but he's alive. There was no time to fret about that anyway. Every second counted.

As Gord had assumed he would do, the man had taken time to scoop all of his precious merchandise into an iron strongbox and lock it. He had the key with him, of course. The sounds from the lane nearby were growing louder and more frenetic—all was well still, but he would have to hurry.

Gord took his weapon and thrust it against the hard metal of the lock. The point bit as if it were going into soft wood rather than cold iron. After a rapid succession of several such cuts, the lock was useless and the box open. Without bothering to select the better ones, Gord took as many stones as he could stuff into his shirt in a few seconds. Then he recrossed the counter and walked calmly out of the shop, heading away from the brawl going on a few doors down. It seemed that some fishmonger, passing this way on his journey home, had run squarely into the gem merchant. The outrage of the latter at losing the thief who had robbed him was matched by that of the fishmonger, who was demanding to know who would pay for his spilt catch. Passersby took sides, and a near riot was now in full swing. Shutters were being slammed and locked, doors barred. Calls for the Patrol were passing down the streets roundabout. Gord was gone from the turmoil in less than a minute.

He went to a tavern and enjoyed himself there. Then Gord headed for the "Down Quarter" of Radigast City, an area where few questions were asked. The previous day, he'd seen a place there he thought would be perfect for his purpose. When his recognition signal was returned, Gord broke into Thieves' Cant, and soon the keeper of the place agreed to examine Gord's merchandise.

The two retired toward a back room. Gord examined the entrance carefully before going in, and scrutinized the room itself even more thoroughly for secret doors or floor traps once he was inside, before settling

down to the business at hand. All of this made the fence grin, for he appreciated professionalism in those he dealt with. They soon struck an agreeable price. Two of the man's assistants fetched his money box, he paid Gord, and that was that. Gord had been careful to have the fellow retain a tithe for the local Guild. Whether he paid it or kept it was his business, but Gord would never be in trouble on that score. Guildmasters had a way of learning the truth, and they seldom used spells to gain such information….

With a fresh half-score of orbs, as well as assorted loose change to boot, Gord felt much better. Now he was solvent again! Time to get on with the rest of it. Whistling a merry tune, Gord went out the northernmost gate of the city, rather than the southeastern one, which led to Muddich. Just as darkness was falling he came upon a gypsy wagon, its driver lounging beside it. After a brief conversation, Gord clambered into the vehicle, the driver clucked the team of horses into motion, and the wagon rolled along the road on its way to who knew where.

One week and fifty leagues later, Gord and his new acquaintances were camped in the rich grasslands of the Artonsamay River Valley. These Rhennee—or Attloi, according to the prejudiced view of the bargefolk—were much the same as their lakefaring cousins, only a bit wilder and rougher. In fact, Gord would never have trusted such folk save for the fact that he was an adopted Rhennee, knew their speech, and actually looked similar to these people. Besides, he had paid them well in gems, although of the smallest and least valuable sort, for their help in his scheme and the subsequent conveyance of his person away from Radigast City.

Gord was frankly happy to be away from the water, but he was sore and stiff. Riding a horse was no simple thing, and his lessons were painful. These wagonborne Rhennee were horse breeders, among other occupations such as thievery, tinkering, and entertaining. This wilderness place was one of their grazing areas, and there were a hundred or so horses with the band. The foal crop had been good, and all the animals were in splendid condition. They would be moved to the Great Northern Bend area in another week, and selected horses would be sold at the annual fair and horse market there. That was where Gord planned to leave the gypsy train and seek his fortune elsewhere.

Meanwhile, however, he practiced his riding, played at fencing with the exceptionally able swordsmen of the group, and even learned the use of the

crossbow. He had no intention of lugging around one of these small missile weapons favored by the wagonfolk, but Gord decided it would be useful if he knew how to operate a crossbow in a tight situation—such as when the barge had nearly been wrecked by the monstrous creature from the depths of Nyr Dyv.

The journey was unhurried, for they stopped at every village and hamlet to offer services, perform, trade, and occasionally make off with some unguarded livestock or goods. Gord noted that these Rhennee were most prudent in exercising thievery. Since this was a route they regularly traveled, the gypsies were careful to give the inhabitants of their stopping places no reason to feel hostility toward them. They tinkered, traded sharply, sold questionable remedies, and stole only small things. That made them exciting and dark visitors, not threatening ones. When they sang, danced, told fortunes, juggled, made their trained animals perform, and otherwise entertained, a bit of dishonesty could be forgiven. Each rustic felt that it was his or her business to be on guard against minor pilfering and poultry theft when the wagonfolk came. After all, they brought news, excitement, and a virtual carnival with them each time they passed through an area.

The fair was held outside the walled town of Caporna. At Fairetime the town's six thousand or so inhabitants served as hosts for travelers from all round the place. For the duration of the month-long event the population inside the walls was nearly twice normal, and thousands more camped outside the town.

Gord and the gypsies arrived at the outskirts of Caporna some three weeks after they had left the vicinity of Radigast City. In a few days the festival that opened the event would be under way, and everyone in the train was busy preparing for the upcoming demands. Having nothing of the like to concern himself with, Gord took the opportunity to improve his horsemanship while seeing a bit of the countryside.

He had pretty well covered the area around Caporna, and spent a goodly amount of time within the town proper as well, when he discovered another encampment of wagonfolk. Their practice astounded the young man, for they were tumblers and acrobats. From the smallest child to the gray-bearded lord of the train, each and every one had some contribution to make to a breathtaking performance.

After an awestruck Gord stood gawking at their rehearsal for a time, one of their number came up to him and suggested that Gord move on. Free shows were not a part of their offering, the man told Gord rather curtly, and he'd soon be able to view their wonders properly during the fair. Having dressed himself in clothing other than that worn by the Rhennee, Gord was not particularly recognizable as an adopted member of the folk, nor could anyone seeing him have guessed that he was a master beggar—or had at least been one once.

Gord conveyed his respect to the man in the patois of the wagonfolk, and topped it off with the secret signs of both beggars and thieves. The muscular performer who had appeared to shoo away a nonpaying spectator now served as his emissary to the leader of the group, and soon Gord was being given warm greetings and cool wine.

After bidding adieu to his traveling companions of the last few weeks, and paying a bit too much for the mount he had selected from them, Gord shifted from one camp of gypsies to another. He was determined to learn more of the feats he had seen performed. Although he had revealed himself as an adopted member of the bargefolk, these Rhennee were quick enough to drop their prejudices and accept Gord—it did not hurt a bit that he had gifted the "lord" of the encampment with fine wine from Caporna. Gord offered to teach the gypsies some of his skills in thievery in return for the instruction he would receive in the arts of acrobatics. There was little time for such interplay during the hustle and bustle of the fair, but when the festivities concluded at Goodmonth's commencement, Gord would be taught, and would himself instruct, as the band moved on in its travels.

Having nothing specific to do during the fair did not keep Gord from enjoying himself. In fact, he thought it a great joke, stealing from the thieves of Caporna! The weeks of Fairetime passed swiftly, and although he had little teaching during this time, Gord managed to pick up some skills just by watching, for he was already quite accomplished at climbing and balance—prerequisites for successful thievery of the more subtle sort. Thus encouraged, he spent more time in town and devised a scheme he was certain would reap dividends.

He again posed as a rich, somewhat foolish, young fop. He allowed himself to be set up for a swindling operation that the Caporna thieves put into action, thinking him an easy mark. He had passed himself off as a connoisseur of art and a collector of statuettes and objects of similar nature.

He was tested with the offer of a dubious piece, as he knew he would be, and dashed the hopes of the swindlers who had been expecting an easy profit by disdainfully rejecting the "valuable" item.

Then, as Gord had also anticipated, the swindlers tried to get the better of him with the old bait-and-switch routine. The thieves took him to an "exclusive shop," which Gord recognized immediately as a phony set-up filled with goods from the storehouses of the thieves and whatever fence was also in on this scam. Gord readily waxed enthusiastic over several of the splendid pieces they had, but then he was hustled out—no sense in making a hasty purchase, or so his "friends" recommended. They promised to meet him again the next day, and they would return to the warehouse to make final decisions—by which time, Gord knew, cheap duplicates would be ready to pack in boxes.

But there was no waiting till the morrow. That night Gord entered the shop from the roof, aided by several of his new gypsy friends. He regretted having to kill a guard, but that was part of the business…. Gord stayed out of Caporna altogether after that night, and he appeared only as a Rhennee man when he went anywhere beyond the gypsies' camp.

The gypsy train that left at the end of the great fair held far more wealth in its wagons than anyone would have expected, and Gord—the one the acrobats had to thank for this new affluence—rode along as their leader's right-hand man.

Chapter 13

As the horseman's steed topped a low rise and galloped into a clearing bathed in moonlight, several quarrels buzzed and hummed past mount and rider. The man crouched lower, and his horse seemed to jump ahead with a burst of new speed. In seconds they were lost in the thick shadows of the trees beyond. A dozen steel-capped warriors followed the fleeing rider through the moonlit meadow and likewise disappeared in the darkness beyond.

Then the pounding of hooves faded into the night, and the place was peaceful again. Insects resumed their chorus, and the rustling of small animals making their nocturnal rounds could be heard by a careful listener. Nearby, a giant owl voiced its deep, mournful hooting. A moment later, the shrill cry of captured prey split the serenity for an instant.

Fortunately for Gord, he was not being hunted by such sure predators as the denizens of the forest were, and he managed to elude his pursuers in the dense woodlands. Both he and his stallion were very tired, but Gord knew they must press on through most of the night, so that when the sun rose, those tracking him would not find their quarry nearby. Dismounted, careful to be as silent as possible, the young outlaw led his steed southwest, going ever deeper into the heart of the Nutherwood.

Utilizing rocky ground, a small rivulet that fed into the Yol to the north, and every other device he could think of to throw off the soldiers who dogged him, Gord plodded onward. Sometime after midnight, he finally came to a dingle where he decided to camp. The stallion fell to grazing immediately as Gord unsaddled the tired animal and flopped down himself, exhausted. He dozed until first light and then was up and moving again.

Gord walked the horse until they found a place to drink. There, he refreshed himself with a quick splash, ate a handful of iron rations, and topped his breakfast off with a bunch of the peppery watercress that grew in the stream. Feeling far better, he mounted and urged the stallion into a trot. Perhaps today he would finally lose his pursuers permanently.

The troop of soldiers chasing him were servants of His Faithfulness, the Canon of Redmod, a town of no particular note near the heartland of the Theocracy of the Pale. When Gord had left Redmod, he had wanted simply to put as much distance between that place and himself as his courser could manage. He had not dreamed that the Canon would send his minions on so long a chase, for it was now nearly two weeks since his departure, and the

soldiers were hounding him still. Gord wondered if their doggedness was because of the golden reliquary he had taken from the cleric's temple, or whether it was because of his familiarity with His Faithfulness' daughter, Light—she had shown him a few things, all right. No matter either way. Whatever their motivation, the outcome would be the same if he were caught by the troop of avenging riders.

As he rode, Gord recalled the events of the past few months. From the Great Bend area, the gypsies had taken their horses southward. The train had passed slowly through County Urnst during the month of Harvester, celebrated Brewfest at Trigot, and then crossed the Franz River just above the city of Galesford. Autumn was spent moving on southward again through the Kingdom of Nyrond, past Woodwych, to the land between the Duntide River and the Celadon Forest where they wintered near the town of Beetu. During this whole time, Gord had been given intensive training in the art of acrobatics, and soon he was tumbling, leaping, vaulting, and even walking the taut-rope with the best of the apprentices. Of course, during this same period he was in turn teaching his adopted family members the fine points of his own crafts. While the wagonfolk were as able as their water-loving kin in performing minor pilferage and thievery, Gord was instructing them on a far higher level, and they were apt pupils.

With the end of Fireseek's chill, the wagons began rolling northward again, making for the Flinty Hills, far distant, before going on to Midmeadow for Growfest, from there to be bound for the annual fair at Radigast City. It was at Mid-meadow that Gord parted company with the train, but not with all of his Rhennee friends. Two adventuresome young Rhennee accompanied him on a foray into the Theocracy, the threesome bent on relieving the prosperous Palish of some of their material treasures.

The adventure had begun well enough. Equipped as they were with the finest mounts from the gypsy herd, the three were soon far away from Midmeadow and well into the Pale. Here they robbed an incautious merchant traveling a back road, there a wealthy tradesman. In the towns, they used more subtle arts to relieve their victims of excess coinage, and in such places Gord and his fellows also utilized their acrobatic skills to perform daring feats of burglary. The Palish were not, however, much impressed with such applications of the profession of thievery, holding the activity in disrepute and giving no license to any association or guild that

allowed such practice. Therefore, the trio stayed but a little time in any one place.

The blending of the races here, Oeridian and Flan, with a bit of blond Suel cropping up here and there, made the Palish a robust and handsome folk. Although their bent was such that they tended toward propriety and soberness, and tenaciously adhered to the teachings of Pholtus, the Palish did have their moments of levity and celebration, too. They were intelligent, industrious, and tough. All told, Gord found them interesting, if a bit dull, but they were also quite prosperous and tended to be easy marks, for there were few thieves among them. Stealing was punishable by death. Then again, so were most other honorable pastimes—such as seduction.

The threesome spent a few days in the town of Ogburg—a city, actually, for it had well over 10,000 inhabitants, although it was an unsophisticated place at best. They then put the peaks of the Rakers behind them and rode north and west along the road to Wintershiven, for their purses were full for the moment. The capital city of the Theocracy was too sober a place, however, and from there the three had traveled southward again, ending up in Redmod. There Gord and his two companions settled down for rest, relaxation, and whatever revelry they could find.

Despite the veil of devoted service they wore, the local populace was ready enough for surreptitious activities of the frivolous and licentious sort, as the small but active bawdy district soon demonstrated to the newcomers. Wild young men with silver to spend were welcome indeed, and soon the three of them were minor celebrities. The lionization did go to their heads a bit, Gord admitted to himself in reflection, so that they became incautious in their talk. While they did not actually tell anyone that they planned to rob the temple, they did plenty of bragging about how rich they soon would be. What transpired after they broke into the strongroom of the place and made off with the treasury that the Canon had so rigorously extorted from the faithful was not surprising, reflected Gord, considering their carelessness.

Beautiful Light had been the key to the success of the heist, of course, and Gord thought that her fury at being left behind when they made off with the loot was probably the major spur to the pursuit, which even now continued. He had promised to take the Canon's daughter along when they left Redmod, and so she had told Gord all about the location of the treasure, and about the magical protections that warded the amassed contributions, which, once pilfered, would enable them to journey elsewhere in high style.

How could she really have thought that three hard-riding thieves could carry along a soft female? Her presence would have made their capture certain within a day or two, for someone other than she could have described the trio to the angry Canon and his men-at-arms, and they would be as conspicuous as could be if they tried to travel with a female.

Gord was certain that Light had described him as completely as anyone could have, and that spurred him on. He had no means of disguise at hand, so his only recourse was to get clear of the Pale as rapidly as possible. This he had been seeking to do for days now, but the cursed soldiers trailing him made it difficult indeed!

The three had split up as soon as they discovered that a company of horsemen was in hot pursuit. All that resulted from this move was a division of the troop following into three separate squadrons. Each group was a dozen or more strong, and each man was equipped with lance, crossbow, and shield. Gord never considered an attempt to thin their numbers by ambush, for what chance did he have against such soldiers? Certainly, a well-spun bullet from his sling might have some effect, but retributive missiles and close pursuit would make such attack the height of folly. Evading them and outdistancing them were utmost in Gord's mind. Evidently, his pursuers desired quite the opposite.

As the terrain began to be cut by gullies and the landscape rolled downward toward the Yol River ahead, Gord turned on a more southerly course and spurred his horse to a canter so as to avoid being caught against the water. From what he had heard about this forest, Gord was none too comfortable traveling within its depths. The place was reputed to hide all sorts of nasty creatures and humanoid brigands, not to mention the bandits said to infest the woodland. Perhaps these tales were the stuff used to keep small children at home, however, for the horsemen on his tail had not hesitated in following when he had plunged into the trees, and a day of traveling amidst the forest had not brought him face to face with anything more fearsome than a smallish bear and many small animals of the sort one would expect to encounter in such a setting.

Near sunset Gord led his steed through the shallow verge of a nasty-looking marsh that spread out to the west as far as he could see. Just as the swollen crimson orb of the sun sank below the horizon, he came out of the morass, remounted, and rapidly rode due south. This left the dangerous lowland far behind by the time full darkness swathed the trees in gloom.

There would be no way for those who still might be at his heels to locate where he had left the marsh until daylight came. Gord dismounted and walked on warily, alert for danger, seeking a sheltered spot to sleep.

A gleam of flickering yellow light alerted him that there were others ahead. Gord dropped his stallion's reins on the ground, patted the animal's neck, and told it in a whisper to remain silent until he came back. The courser seemed to understand, for it whickered softly, nodded its great head, and fell to searching for green growth amidst the tree roots.

Gord crept stealthily toward the firelight. It was quite difficult to move silently, for the forest floor was covered with a scattering of dead leaves and dry twigs hidden by new growth, but Gord was adept at stealth. Only the faintest of sounds marked his approach to the source of the illumination. He was soon close enough to see that there were two small bonfires, and by their dancing light Gord noted that some two dozen men—bandits, judging by their dress and weapons—were scattered in the glen, preparing their food and readying for the night. They were a scurvy lot in motley armor and garb drawn from all nations and races, it seemed, for Gord saw several orcish and elvish half-breeds among them.

On the far side of the encampment were six or eight horses. There were piles of goods near them, so Gord figured that the animals were used to carry captured spoils. This band must be returning to their base of operations, for the heap of stuff near the horses was sufficient to burden them all. Gord stayed in a crouch and began to creep slowly backward, for he had seen enough. Then a heavy weight fell upon his back, pinning him to the ground, and a sharp spearpoint pressed against his neck.

"Don't move!" a rough voice hissed. "One sound and you're dead!"

Chapter 14

Gord stood weaponless before the bandit chieftain, guarded by the pair of sentries who had spotted him. Capturing him had been easy, and the two were smirking. Easy pickings were appreciated by their ilk, and Gord had furnished them with a surprising amount of loot. Evidently he had been spotted when he first approached the encampment, and while two of the sentries crept up on him, another pair backtracked and found Gord's horse. The gold reliquary, a heap of coins, and his weapons were displayed on a cloak, his too, spread at the bandit leader's feet.

"Why were you spying on us?" the big outlaw demanded.

"To survive, one must be alert," said Gord evenly. "I was not spying, save to alert myself of any possible threat to my survival."

"Well, chum, one didn't make much of a job of it, did one?" The bandit was mocking him, and Gord silently vowed that he would turn the tables at first opportunity. Then the man must have noted a defiance in his captive's eyes, for after a second he added, "A tough little one, ain't you?"

With that, he stirred the pile of coins before him with the toe of his dirty boot, grinning down on Gord all the while, hand on his sword hilt. Gord stared back but kept his gaze expressionless and neutral.

"Good!" the leader boomed. "I like guys with spunk. Tell you what I'm gonna do. I lost some good men this raid, so the company is short-handed. If you can handle yourself, instead of killing you I'll enlist you." The fellow paused and stared hard at Gord. Gord looked back but said nothing.

"Okay, smartass. First you wrestle with Bogodor," said the chieftain, pointing at a hulking brute Gord could see out of the corner of his eye, "and if you survive that, you can have at Finn over there with quarterstaves." There were catcalls and sniggers from the assembled bandits at that. The chieftain laughed a bit too, but then shouted for silence and continued.

"You don't really have to beat 'em—just survive. I'm givin' you a break, but only because I'm short-handed. We're a fair bunch here, so if you make the grade, I'll even give you one share of the loot here and you can keep your sword and knife." The bandit's tone was magnanimous—but if he expected Gord to thank him, the chieftain was wrong.

"How about the dagger?" Gord inquired mildly. "I'm best with that weapon."

"Sorry, chum," the big leader said as he picked up the blade. "I've taken a shine to it, but if you're real good in the tests I'll give you my old one

sometime."

Gord shrugged. "No sense in arguing, is there? Where do I fight this Bogo-dope?"

"That's Bogodor!" snarled a muscular half-orc as he moved fully into Gord's line of sight. "Come here, runt, an' I'll show you who's a dope!"

With that, the bandits made a ring near the bonfire, and Gord was shoved unceremoniously into the circle even as he was stripping off his jerkin. Bogodor was satisfied to have at it immediately, but Gord skipped away from his first clumsy rush, managing to get his shirt off meanwhile. Now his lean, muscular torso was bare. His opponent would find no easy hold on loose garments.

Bogodor made another grab for him, this one less clumsy and more calculated. Again Gord eluded the attack and circled. The ugly half-orc was not as stupid as he seemed; this Gord determined from the next couple of minutes of combat. Bogodor was testing Gord's skills, and each time he attempted a move, he measured Gord's responses.

Gord was measuring his opponent in return. Although rather slow and a bit uncoordinated, the half-orc was strong and his hands were huge. If Bogodor ever got him in a firm hold, Gord knew that the fellow could break bones—and would probably enjoy the process, too. That mentality could actually work to Gord's advantage if he played things properly; it would not be the first time Gord had turned an opponent's aggression into victory, he thought, recalling for an instant his duel with Zoltan.

This match, however, was trickier than it first appeared. If Gord was crippled, then he'd be useless and slain out of hand. If he seriously injured Bogodor, Gord knew that at best he'd have the undying enmity of the half-orc and whatever friends the fellow had, and the score would be evened with a knife across his throat one night. Killing him would make Gord's position that much worse.

His only option, Gord realized, was to somehow win without beating Bogodor badly, and without himself being injured and unable to face the test of staves. One thing at a time, he cautioned himself, as the half-orc bandit managed to grab Gord by his left arm. Gord flipped out of the grip before Bogodor could lock it into a hold, and he delivered a painful kick to the bandit's stomach in the process. Gord was still in the fight, but now the half-orc had a far better idea of what his small opponent could do.

Bogodor advanced cautiously now. The encircling outlaws gave shouts of encouragement mixed with demands for Gord's dismemberment. The half-orc feinted at a leg-grab with his left hand and then swung his hamlike right in a looping uppercut, which, although it just grazed Gord's chin, was sufficient to send him sprawling. The off-balance Bogodor flopped down upon Gord with sufficient force to knock the wind out of him, but fortunately it took the brute a couple of seconds to get into a position where he could utilize his advantage. In that time, Gord managed to recover his breath and clear his head sufficiently to counter. As Bogodor grabbed Gord's hair with his left hand and brought his right forearm down, aiming for his pinned opponent's throat, things shifted.

By hunching, Gord managed to both protect his neck and get into a position where his jaws could lock on the beefy arm trying to crush his windpipe. As he bit the brawny arm with all his strength, Gord slammed his open right palm into the underside of Bogodor's jaw. The blow jerked the half-orc's head back with a snap, although the bandit's thick neck muscles prevented any serious harm.

This combination of bite and blow caused the bandit to blink, then howl in pain and rage. Even as he bellowed, another attack was already causing him further difficulty. Gord had caught the fingers tangled in his hair, wrapped his hand around one of the digits, and bent it back toward the breaking point. At the same time, Gord used his left hand to grasp the huge right fist of the arm he was biting, trying to pull it to Gord's left and away from the area of his throat to relieve some of the pressure on his chest.

These actions were more than sufficient to make Bogodor move. His effort to stop the jaws from clamping on his arm while maintaining his attempt to choke Gord, prevent the breaking of his finger, and still remain atop his adversary at the same time turned out to be disastrous for him. The leverage on the half-orc's right arm forced Bogodor to roll sideways when he attempted to pull his left hand away from Gord's hold on it before the finger snapped. Gord helped the situation further by bringing his right knee up sharply as Bogodor's weight was removed from that leg. The blow didn't impact with real force on the half-orc's groin, but the grunt he made when it hit told Gord that it hurt plenty.

As the bandit's weight moved off him entirely, Gord used his acrobatic skills to arch his back and spring erect. As the bewildered Bogodor

struggled to his feet, Gord spat blood at him and mocked him through reddened lips.

"What's the matter, Bogo-dope? You only able to wrestle old men and cripples? Or maybe you like tussling with little boys…."

His eyes red, Bogodor let out a howl of rage. He lost all plan of attack, wanting only to grab Gord and crush him to a bloody pulp. There wasn't much room to maneuver within the circle of bandits, but Gord could leap. He somersaulted directly into the half-orc's rush, and his feet came up just as Bogodor's big belly arrived at the same place. The force of Bogodor's charge easily reversed the momentum of Gord's roll, and with his back firmly resting on the ground, his stiff legs acted as a lever to lift the charging bandit off his feet, even as inertia continued to carry him forward.

Gord used his own strength to assist the bandit on his way, and Bogodor, wind driven from his body by the belly-kick, arced over Gord's head and came down with a jarring thud nearly six feet from where Gord now stood. The half-orc didn't move. The onlookers were stunned. Bogodor was the strongest of their number, and he'd been beaten by a young fellow half his size.

There were a couple of grudging words of congratulation from the group, and someone slapped Gord on the back. Bogodor was now coming around, and already a few jibes were being aimed his way. Gord stood silently, poised. He looked at the bandit with no expression as Bogodor slowly got to his feet. The half-orc stared at him a moment, shook his head, and then shot Gord a half-grin.

"For a little smartass punk, you fight good," the brute said. "We go at it again someday soon…."

Before anything else could be said, the chieftain stepped in and grabbed Gord by the shoulders. "Not bad, chum, not bad," he said with a tinge of admiration in his voice, "but you're not through yet! Finn here wants to show you a thing or two 'bout handlin' a stick!"

Finn was a rangy fellow, half a head taller than Gord, and he wore the quilted padding used both to prevent chainmail from chafing and to help protect its wearer. Such gear would be a tremendous boon in a match with quarterstaves, and Finn's expression showed he was well aware of his advantage.

Gord knew he was in real trouble now. He watched Finn spin and shadow-fight with his iron-shod staff. It was soon going to be apparent to

everyone that Gord was completely inexperienced with such a weapon. Finn certainly needed no protection from any attack Gord could mount with a quarter-staff. All the young man knew about billets like this was using them to assist in balance or for vaulting. The contest would be over quickly, and Gord could only hope that he wasn't crippled or killed in the sure-to-be-painful process.

A new arena-circle formed, and the bandits began cheering and calling out once again. Gord was handed a heavy staff and again shoved forward. The ring closed behind him, and Finn stood facing him, on guard with his quarterstaff. Both men stood motionless for a couple of seconds, staring into each other's eyes.

Suddenly, several shrieks rang out from the circle of outlaws. Gord saw with shock that a crossbow bolt had suddenly sprouted from the chest of a man across from him. Another missile had left a scarlet trail across Finn's cheek.

Gord immediately threw himself to the ground, instinctively wondering why he hadn't heard the angry buzz of the bolt that hit Finn, for its flight certainly must have come close to his head. Already two or three of the bandits were down, flopping or dead, and others were wounded. Nevertheless, they were tough fellows, and their response was immediate. It took only seconds for them to recover from the surprise of the unexpected hail of quarrels; then they were running, dodging, crouching, scattering, at the same time that Gord was moving into a crouch and preparing to defend himself, somehow, with the staff. Weapons were unsheathed or grabbed and the encampment was nearly ready for a counterattack against the missiles when six mailed horsemen thundered into the clearing. So the canon's hounds were still after him!

Bolts still flew through the air even as the riders cantered toward the bandits with leveled lances. More bandits were slain or wounded by these missiles before the sharp lanceheads bit home. As a lancer thundered past where Gord was crouched, he stabbed the thick quarterstaff between the horse's legs. The animal neighed in pain and stumbled forward, tail over head. The rider was thrown down, rolled upon by the horse, then thrust through with a spear from his intended target. A bolt took the bandit in the leg, and he, in turn, fell to the dirt.

Gord rolled for cover in the shadows, searching frantically for some weapon with which to defend himself. Already about half of the bandits

were dead or seriously wounded, and only two of the lancers were down, at least one done for certain. The four still atop their steeds had discarded their long weapons in favor of sword and axe. Several more of the outlaw band fell, but one of the horsemen was struck full in the chest by a flail. The soldier had hardly hit the ground before two bandits fell upon him and finished the work.

"Here, chum!" The words reached Gord just as a blade—his own dagger!—buried itself in the tree trunk beside his head. The thrower was the chief of the company of bandits. Gord was grateful for the gesture—and also pleased that the fellow didn't seem to notice how far the dagger had sunk into the tough bronzewood bole. As Gord tugged the weapon free with difficulty, the leader called out to him again.

"It ain't much, but you better be good with it, 'cause we're up to our ass in alligators!" With that, the chieftain darted beyond the clearing, probably aiming to stop the sniping cross-bowmen from doing further bloody target practice.

Gord moved to position himself where he could make effective use of the dagger. No sense in pitting himself face-to-face with the soldiers' longer arms. From behind, or in a grappling melee, the blade would be deadly, but against longsword or great axe the disadvantage would be telling.

Only one of the men-at-arms was still horsed. Another fought beside his slain steed, broad-bladed sword swinging in vicious arcs. At least two of the crossbowmen had dropped their missile weapons to join their embattled fellows in the glen. Bogodor, armed with a huge morning star, stepped before their advance and with a mighty swing wounded one, despite his mail, before either could react. Then both soldiers countered with swords, and the half-orc was hotly defending himself from their cuts and thrusts as Gord crept closer to the action.

Bogodor might have been strong, but he wasn't skilled at arms. In a minute he was bleeding, and in another he was down. The soldiers were good—but that didn't prevent Gord from striking as soon as he got his blade within range of one soldier's back. The supernaturally keen point of his dagger passed through the steel mesh of the foeman's mail coat as if it were mere leather, and a second blow finished the job.

The dead man's comrade had been heading off to assist the unhorsed soldier, who was now hard pressed defending himself against several of the bandits. The sounds of his partner's demise made him turn back quickly,

however. When he saw Gord taking the dead soldier's sword, he raised his own brand and rushed to revenge his fallen mate. Gord barely had time to raise the newly gained sword and ward off the man's opening stroke.

Gord found himself in a lengthy fencing match that tested his skills and abilities to their fullest. The soldier was better than he at swordplay, but Gord had the advantage of his dagger to ward and threaten. Both opponents were bleeding from small cuts—Gord more so than the armored foeman—but Gord was fast and agile, and far fresher than the mail-burdened swordsman opposing him. The soldier aimed a flurry of blows at Gord, and when this onslaught forced Gord to retreat, the fellow finally took the opportunity to unsheath his own poniard. Now the soldier thought the match to be balanced—or unbalanced, rather—in his favor, and he moved in for the kill.

Gord hurled his dagger with full force into his opponent's thigh. The soldier, in severe pain, made an off-balance lunge that Gord easily dodged, then prepared to attack again. But the fellow couldn't keep from glancing down for a fraction of a second at the hilt of the weapon protruding from his thigh. That blink of time was all Gord needed. He struck a desperate blow with his sword, using both hands to maximize its effect. Blade edge snapped steel links and bone as it clove the shoulder, sending the soldier to the ground, never to rise again. Another one down, thought Gord as he crouched and rapidly surveyed the area nearby for other antagonists.

There was no one to be seen, only still forms. From the trees around the hollow he heard the sounds of battle, a shout, a cry, and then only silence broken by weak groans from the bodies scattered nearby. Gord stepped into the darkness and waited.

A few minutes passed, and then he heard the sound of cautious footsteps approaching the encampment in the hollow. The twin fires burned but feebly now, and it was difficult to distinguish anything beyond a few paces from them. A dark shape entered the clearing, moving from body to body. Gord wished he had his dagger, but he hefted the big sword, preparing to face another opponent. The unidentified man came closer. Then a tongue of flame from a burning log shot up for a moment and brought more brightness to the place. The grim face of Finn was revealed in the brief glow.

"Hey, Finn," called Gord softly, using the fellow's name to give immediate assurance of friendliness. "I'm here. Who else lives?" With that,

Gord moved slowly from his place of concealment and allowed Finn a moment to identify him before he went to the body of the dead soldier and recovered his precious dagger.

Finn watched him with a stony expression. "So our captive is now one of the surviving Company of Freetakers," he said with sarcasm in his voice. "Well, shit…. You must be pretty good or you wouldn't have made it, I suppose. Most of these others sure didn't." He left it at that and returned to his inspection. Gord noted with a shudder that he was slitting throats.

As it turned out, Finn determined that only three of his comrades had less than mortal wounds; they .would recover and be well enough to move on in a couple of days. Finn and Gord had checked every fallen person, soldier and bandit alike. Hopelessly wounded comrades and foemen were emotionlessly done in by the tall brigand. The dead were stripped of any valuables, and the horses of the men-at-arms were tethered with the draft animals of the bandits. Gord's heart lifted at the sight of his own stallion securely tied with the latter.

"Seeing as how there's none to object just now," Finn said flatly, "you and I get to divvy up the spoils. I'll take five shares for my work. You get two, and we'll assign one each for Jan, Crowbait, and Kalonas."

"Hell with you," Gord replied just as flatly. "Just because your captain died doesn't make you chief." Gord met a menacing stare from Finn with one of his own.

Finn broke the contest by slowly eyeballing the trio of wounded, who were in no condition to join the debate. "You take their shares, then," he said, nodding toward them, "and we're even."

"Wrong again," snapped Gord, beginning to feel anger. "I take what's mine—including what I already got from two of those Palish soldiers—and you split up what's left however you decide."

Grim-faced, Finn made a motion toward the shortsword at his hip. Gord's own was drawn quicker, but he did not attack. Finn let the blade slide back into its scabbard. "Let's talk this over in friendly fashion, ehh…?"

"Gord is my name," the young adventurer said, naked steel still in hand.

It took a long time, but eventually they agreed on a split. There was quite a bit of loot, far more than Gord had imagined. The dead leader of the company, one Trigon, had led the bandits in a successful raid into the Pale. The bales of goods were not common goods, it seemed, but rare commodities—fur pelts and ivory from the lands to the north, brocaded

cloth and tapestries from Tenhite artisans, and the costly devotional incense of the Pale—intended for the markets of Rel Mord in Nyrond. What the former owners of these goods might have personally carried, Gord did not learn, but the dozen men-at-arms had netted the survivors of their attack ten good mounts, a pile of weapons and armor, saddles and tack, and about two orbs value in various coins.

Finn wanted the gold reliquary more than any of the other treasure. Gord agreed he could have it for a quitclaim on everything else, provided that he could get the agreement of Jan, Crowbait, and Kalonas that seven shares went to Gord, and one to each of them.

"They'll agree," said Finn with a sly smile, "because they know that they're not in good enough shape to argue with me."

Finn accompanied Gord and the wounded outlaws only as far as the edge of Nutherwood. He rode toward Midmeadow then, while Gord and the others made for Longford. As they passed through the shallows, crossing the Artonsamay into the Bandit Kingdoms, Gord wondered what fate would befall the lone man. Finn had indeed gained a far better monetary exchange, for the reliquary and its contents easily outvalued the whole of the other treasure by a factor of not less than six to one.

But that disparity didn't trouble Gord in the least. Somehow, he thought, those Palish soldiers had managed to follow him wherever he went, despite tricks that should have at least thrown them off his trail for a bit. Somehow they had located him in the bandit camp, even though they couldn't have tracked him through that marsh at night. Luck, perhaps. The noise of the rowdy outlaws during his testing had been over-loud, but nevertheless…. Gord did not believe that Finn would lead a long and prosperous life from the proceeds of sale of the temple's prize.

That evening Gord and his bandit companions arrived at their destination —the outlaw city of Stoink, where they could dispose of the goods and horses and rest without fear of pursuit. At last Gord was coming to a place where everyone he met was a thief of one sort or another, and he relished the prospect. Not that he expected things would be much different, but perhaps hypocrisy and pretense would be done away with.

"Imagine," he thought, "a place where officials honestly admit their robbery!"

Chapter 15

Once the Aerdians had amassed an empire that extended far beyond the modern-day boundaries of what is known as the Great Kingdom. At its height, the northern frontier reached all the way to the northern bank of the Artonsamay River. Stoink was then a military outpost. At first a fortified encampment, the place grew rapidly to become a town. As imperial troops were brought there to prepare for further conquest, with them came a host of civilians—craftsmen, sutlers, camp followers, and the lot. When the expansion of the Aerdy empire stopped, the locale became a bastion against invaders. It was walled and became a garrison place. The ebb of the Overking's power came slowly, and as the edges of the empire crumbled into sovereign states, Stoink was more and more isolated from its distant rulers and took on greater individuality and independence. After some four centuries its inhabitants turned to banditry, and for two hundred years thereafter, right down to this day, they have continued to be robbers. The town was now Gord's home, and it felt right to him.

The town proper had perhaps twelve thousand people. Two suburbs, Holdroon and Ratswharf, brought the total to fourteen thousand—when there were few bandit-cum-merchant caravans, or mercenary companies, in the area. Stoink was actually a city state, for its Lord Mayor was also "Boss" of a considerable territory, essentially what had once been a frontier march and fiefdom granted from the Overking of Aerdy. Boss Dhaelhy, Lord Mayor of Stoink, despotically ruled the destinies of somewhere between fifty and seventy thousand folk—provided his enforcers were on hand to back up his dictates. Otherwise, residents and visitors alike did pretty much as they pleased. That made for a wild, brawling, and thoroughly chaotic community, with competing factions constantly at each other's throats.

Gord was gratified that he had come with a fat purse, for the pickings were far from ample in Stoink. Everyone was busy trying to steal from his neighbor, and of course those neighbors with anything worth taking were exceptionally vigilant with respect to guarding valuables.

Jan, Crowbait, and Kalonas took their splits and drifted off to revel in whatever sinks of debauchery they favored. Gord found an inn, The Three Gables, on the west end of town, and there he settled down to reconnoiter. For the first week or so he would occasionally encounter one or another of the three bandits, but evidently they ran out of funds and went elsewhere to

seek more, for Gord never ran into them again. He certainly didn't miss their company, for the nine wards of Stoink provided sufficient entertainment. After a few weeks, however, exploration and discovery began to weary him.

If the town was an odd mixture of buildings, its polyglot population was even stranger. From the throngs of freebooters, bargemen, and riffraff of Ratswharf, where cargo stolen from who knew where arrived daily, to Holdroon's rowdy encampment of brigand gangs and mercenary companies, there were all races of men, near-men, and humanoids.

Stoink offered something to suit the taste, base or not, of resident and visitor alike. The shops carried goods from every part of the Flanaess, from distant parts of the Great Kingdom, the Baklunish states of Tusmit and Ekbir…. Every place seemed to produce some item that the robber bands eventually brought here. Interspersed with these shops, the vice dens, taverns, slave pens, and unidentified establishments were the stores where normal artisans, craftsmen, and tradesfolk made and sold their wares. The apparently large number of legitimate businesses surprised Gord at first, but then he realized it was logical that such a population needed the goods and services of any normal community as well as those endeavors directly related to banditry.

Ratswharf boasted a rope-walk, tanneries, and a brisk trade in small spars and timber. In Stoink proper, the tanned leather of aurochs, horses, and more exotic creatures was worked into leather goods of all sorts, especially armor and shields of exceptional quality. Gord learned that large shipments of such were sent to outfit soldiers and adventurers of the lands around the Nyr Dyv, and beyond. The origin of the armor was not advertised, naturally.

After traffic in stolen goods, the next mainstay of the economy was slave trading. That major industry brought buyers from many distant places and was the main revenue source for the town itself. Holdroon was a thriving village dominated by taverns, brothels, gambling parlors, and similar places aimed at separating arriving bandits and free-lancers from their coinage. Amid this squalor, though, were also weapon forges, horse traders, and all manner of provisioners and suppliers.

The town gates were open from dawn to dusk, but as the sun's last rays tinged the sky with rosy hues, all large bodies of foreigners were herded outside Stoink, so there was much nighttime revelry in the two adjoining villages. Gord had sampled the offerings of these villages frequently since

arriving in this bandit land. Ratswharf and Holdroon had little more than low dives, however, and Gord found he greatly preferred the entertainments of Serpent Lane and Suggil Way to anything outside the walls.

Leisure activities of this sort tended to be expensive, so after a few weeks Gord became more alert for money-making opportunities. Unlike spending opportunities, chances for gain were more scarce around here than honest men and virgins. Certainly, his skills enabled him to pick up a few coppers here, a silver noble or so there, but nothing significant. Before much more time passed, Gord found himself down to the last few drabs of his share of bandit loot and facing the prospect of dipping into his own hoard of electrum, gold, and platinum. He decided it was time to break out of his traditional mold and do something productive.

Locating the headquarters of the local Thieves' Guild was simple—it bore a large and colorful sign! The rather splendid place was on Safe Avenue, in the Norward between the Slave Market and Stonegate, the eastern entryway that also divided Stoink's Claybrick Ward from the administrative Greatward complex.

Safe Street was a thoroughfare linking the fortress area of the lords of the city with the bustling slave bazaar to the north. (Gord enjoyed the street names for the routes leading to the market place—Safe, Joy, Shackle… cute folk, these Stoinkers.) This seemed both a logical and cautious place for headquarters to be, near the most prosperous quarter with its back to the great blocks of the wall, and having a direct route to the government offices to the south. So thinking, Gord turned the corner of Crook Street (another enjoyable name) and crossed the pike-straight Safe Street. In a short time he was within the confines of the thieves' home base.

"Here to recover stolen property?" a dun-clad fellow asked mildly from a trestle table that served as a desk, separating the building's vestibule from access to the interior.

Gord surveyed him briefly, shaking his head.

The thief-guard looked surprised, for Gord appeared to be a well-to-do artisan or merchant, perhaps—one who should be uncomfortable in surroundings such as these. "Then are you here to hire services?"

Gord shook his head again and studied the interior of the place, moving so as to be able to peer into the corridor behind the speaker.

"Okay, buddy, quit gawking and tell me what the hell you do want…. Are you lost? Stupid? Or a sightseer?" At this last question, the guard got out of

his chair, strode around the desk, and none too gently took Gord by the arm to usher him out.

"I'm here to join the guild," Gord said blandly.

The thief paused in his effort to hustle the strangely hard-to-move fellow outside and laughed. "Who put you up to this, anyway?" he said, his tone growing less jocular. "It is a piss-poor joke—and you're lucky I'm taking it easy with you!" As this last was said, the guard found that Gord had somehow turned and was moving behind him and back into the room again. Now the thief was getting peevish.

"No joke, friend," Gord told the slowly reddening fellow as he sprang lightly atop the desk and then into the guard's chair. "I am an accomplished master, and I am here to inscribe my name on your register."

This was too much for the man, and he reached for his dagger. But his hand grasped nothing, and he stared down in amazement at the empty scabbard. When he glared up toward the interloper, he found Gord cleaning his nails with the weapon. Worse yet, a small pile of his belongings were on the table in front of this bold fellow!

"That's it, asshole!" he said, leaping for Gord.

The thief landed with a crash where Gord had been sitting a moment before, then slumped to the floor. As pounding footsteps approached from within the building, the poor rogue managed to regain his feet and look around in a daze.

"I'm here," Gord said nearly in his ear from a crosslegged seat atop the trestle table. "And I still wish to register."

"Dammit, Stoat! What are you doin' out here?" The speaker was a man of powerful build and no-nonsense expression. He stood in the hall behind the desk, glaring alternately at the guard and at Gord with one bright gray eye—and a black leather patch covering the other socket. The man had an authoritative air that Gord immediately perceived—even more impressive, in his own way, than Gord remembered Arentol to be. Was he a high-ranking thief? The master of this Guild? Or something else altogether?…

Gord smiled at the man who was surveying him and nodded a greeting, not committing himself with words until he saw what would happen next.

"Listen, Gellor," the fellow now identified as Stoat whined, "I dint do nothing but try to keep this shit out of here, but he got rough. Look out for him—he's fast!" he warned.

Taking Stoat at his word, Gellor moved to draw his sword and take care of things in his own way. Seeing this, Gord laughed merrily and held his smile.

"Hold on!" he said. "I did no harm to Stoat's person, only to his pride. When I put on a performance, he came to escort me out, and as he tried, I stripped him of dag, money, and all. Look here!" Gord cried, pointing to the loot and letting out another laugh.

Gellor abandoned his threatening posture, slammed his sword back in its sheath, and stared at the evidence. Then he looked hard at Stoat with the hint of a smile on his face.

"Come on, Gellor, the asshole threw me over the desk!" Stoat argued.

"You jumped over it to attack me, only I wasn't there to get," Gord countered mildly. Then, for good measure, he added flippantly, "You're the asshole."

At that, the grin disappeared from Gellor's face. "Never mind who is or isn't a sphincter muscle here," he said, again directing his attention to Gord. "What the hell do you want?"

"I am an accomplished thief, Gord by name, here to join the guild. Stoat, here, can testify to my abilities—"

"No screwin' 'round or horseplay at headquarters, see!" Gellor interrupted. He sized up Gord in silence for a moment. "No more of this crap with fellow thieves, either… even if they are assholes," he continued. "Now come on back, and I'll get you enrolled. It costs a lucky if you're beyond journeyman status, dues are a noble a month whether or not you score, and we take the usual twenty percent."

As Gord moved to follow him, Gellor turned back to Stoat. "Now keep a better watch, chump, and don't be mistakin' your fellows for marks anymore!" he ordered as Stoat sullenly set about repocketing his possessions.

Gellor took Gord to a large chamber inside the headquarters. "In case you haven't already figured it out," he said, "I have a high station, shall we say, within this organization. You are fortunate that I, and not one of Stoat's peers, happened along when you made your ostentatious entrance. Now, let's see how serious you really are about joining the Guild."

Gellor summoned a messenger and instructed him to fetch six other individuals for a meeting. He introduced Gord to these men, all master

thieves, and informed Gord that they would pass judgment on his request for membership. Then Gellor sat back and ordered Gord to tell his story.

To be on the safe side, Gord told the audience that he was from Leukish. He briefly recounted his travels in Urnst and the Theocracy, omitting most details, including the fact that he was associated with the Rhennee wagonfolk. The less they actually knew about him, the better; after all, what was actually important was his talent as a thief. This was established readily enough, by the successful performance of a few simple tests for the benefit of the master thieves followed by Gellor's recounting to them of Stoat's embarrassing experience in the entranceway.

With the preliminaries out of the way, Gord paid over the initiation fee of one electrum coin, plus a silver one for his first month's dues. His name was written on the guild register, a writ of identification was prepared for him, and the rules of thievery in Stoink were carefully explained to him by Assistant Guildmaster Uve Paulic.

No establishment protected by Boss Dhaelhy could be touched. These places were marked by the official blazon of Stoink. All other spots were fair game, although it seemed to be the thieves' opinion that there were damn few other locations worth bothering with. Marks were marks, but Mayorial Guards, the Watch, town officials, and a raft of others were considered off limits. The enumeration went on and on until Gord's head began to swim. His initial impression of Stoink as a veritable playground for thieves was apparently somewhat inaccurate, to put it mildly.

"This place is worse than Wintershiven!" he exclaimed with disgust. "At least a thief there can steal from anybody, though the risk be death."

"That brings me to the part about punishments here," replied Uve Paulic. He then proceeded to detail all of the things a thief would suffer upon being caught in the commission of a felony, or if apprehended afterward—unless the protection of the guild was obtained by reporting a successful job to officials at any of the various, and constantly shifting, sub-headquarters that the thieves maintained in the nine wards of the city. An assassin could still be sent after a thief, of course, even after he or she was safe from the law—but that seldom happened, Uve added, for the expense of hiring a killer was great, and the property wasn't returned even if the thief was dispatched.

As Gord was preparing to make his leave, Gellor came up to him and said in a friendly tone, "It's a rotten place to make a dishonest drab, but after a while the town grows on you."

"So does green slime!" Gord retorted.

"Tell you what," the one-eyed man said in a placating way.

"You and I can go over to Holdroon. I've seen only a little of your work, and I'd like to see more. Besides, I hear that a bunch just arrived that hit it big. We can both pick up some change!"

Gellor told Gord that the Horn and Haunch was the best tavern in the whole urban area, not just in Holdroon, so they went there. The place had a typical afternoon crowd, although the drinkers appeared a bit better dressed than in the places Gord had been to. Most were obviously mercenaries, bandits, or worse, but they wore oiled mail or well-preserved leather. Studding on jack and byrnie was polished. Cloth garments were neither shoddy nor in need of cleaning and mending. Most surprising of all, there was no overpowering odor of sweat and horses. The place was a marvel indeed—and the wenches were most pretty and buxom too! Gord was happy he'd decided to humor Gellor, or vice versa. No matter.

"This is one of the most pleasant gathering places I've ever frequented," said Gellor. "Even as well-traveled as you are," he added with a smirk, "I expect you will find it the same. Now for some refreshment!"

Gellor recommended some of the dry white wine from Furyondy to begin with. After several goblets of the stuff, Gord felt quite able to attack the tavern's bill of fare, and soon food was set before them. Tubb, the proprietor, fitted his name quite well, and this worthy, together with a woman to see to their drink and a lad to step and fetch, personally attended the pair. Gellor was evidently a regular here, and well-regarded by Tubb.

More of the crisp, apple-fragranced wine was poured for them as their host set a pewter salver before them. It was filled with morsels of radishes with black skins, smoked rounds of eel, scallions, and pickles. All of it tasted delicious, especially when washed down with the Furyondian vintage. They also had a small loaf of bread with a golden and crispy crust and soft, white crumb. The whole was gone all too soon, and Gord was about to call for more when bowls of pink liquid were placed before them. This stuff was a thick, creamy soup of a sort he had never tasted. Gellor told him it was made from the young giant crayfish taken from the mill pond of Agile Creek. It was made with wine, cream, and herbs, plus only Tubb knew what. Gord felt like licking the bowl clean when he'd finished the last spoonful he could get out of it.

Both men sat back a bit and enjoyed their contentment. The wench, Amy, brought them fresh goblets, filled this time with an emerald-colored elvish wine—whether from Celene or Ulek, Gord neither knew nor cared. As the wine was poured, the boy hastily removed their bowls, for Tubb was at hand with a brace of squabs for each. The birds were roasted to perfection, juicy, and stuffed with green grapes.

When the tiny bones were picked clean and the last globe of fruit devoured, Gord thought no prince or king had ever dined so well. Gellor, in contrast, seemed only mildly satisfied, telling their host that so far all had been acceptable. So far? That made Gord wonder, but not for long. The elvish wine was whisked away in favor of a deep ruby-hued wine served to them in chalices. Gord imitated Gellor's actions as the one-eyed thief swirled and sniffed the stuff. The aroma was heady and tantalizing. Gord sipped and found the flavor full, strong, and impossible to describe. Just as one flavor seemed to come to mind, the vintage moved a different part of his palate to identify another taste, and when he let the last of it pass down his throat, still another sensation filled his mouth. Then a vast dish filled with mutton and legumes, seasoned with garlic and herbs, was placed before them, and both fell to—Gord more from the appetizing odor and appearance of the dish than from hunger for it. Could it be that this course was even better than the previous ones?

Neither man could possibly finish these last portions served, and when the remainder was cleared, both belched and grinned. As if by magic, small plates with various sorts of greens were placed before them. Gord's nose detected vinegar, fine oil, and pepper. Gellor speared the leafy bits and ate them with relish, and Gord followed suit. The stuff was tasty and removed the greasy mutton aftertaste from his mouth. Soon the plate was clear of all but a few stray bits of parsley and cress. At last they were finished, thought Gord, but he was mistaken once again! The astonished Gord was served a trencher of thin, white bread, a dozen cheeses were put before them, and a crock of butter placed between the pair.

As more wine was poured, Gellor said, "Tubb, you continue to amaze me, I must admit. Where did you find these wonderful cheeses? I haven't seen their like in years!"

Tubb only beamed and hurried off to serve his other customers. Gellor enlightened Gord as to the nature of several of the small wheels and rounds on the table. One was a goat cheese from far to the west, Ket, actually.

Another, one with great holes and a sharp, vaguely nutty flavor, was Perrenlander. Still another was a creamy and delicious, but very smelly, one made by the Frustii and known as Djekul for the town of its origin. Best of all, Gord liked an ivory-colored cheese with greenish marbling through its center. His companion informed him it was called Wickler, from the Yeomanry. Just after this array came some diminutive tarts of various sort—berry, nut, and mincemeat. At last it was really over, and the thoroughly stuffed patrons sipped brandy and groaned.

"How could such a place exist?" Gord demanded of Gellor. "And how came you to find it? Never have I eaten such!"

The one-eyed man smiled sardonically and shrugged.

"No, no! Tell me."

"Come on, my boy," he replied. "Think you seriously that everyone here has always been a lowly thief or always dwelt in such a pest-hole as Stoink?"

Ruminating on the full meaning of those remarks, Gord joined Gellor in a stroll around Holdroon to settle their meal and work off its attendant lethargy. After all, they had come here for more than a banquet.

Chapter 16

Near midnight they entered the Double Dagger. The rundown building was packed with roistering men, and no one noticed two more of the same sort when they entered. The hall was long and relatively narrow, and Gord and Gellor spent a fair amount of time slowly working their way from front to rear, pausing now and then to get fresh flagons and join briefly in a conversation or a game. If anything, the tavern became more crowded with the passage of time, but while there were many patrons there were few worthy of attention from pickpocket or cutpurse. Risking detection for the sake of gaining sufficient money to merely supply themselves with drinks during the exercise seemed foolish and wasteful. Gord was just getting ready to suggest that they move on to some more promising place when a group of loud and laughing newcomers attracted his attention. The young thief knew that their boisterousness was by design, not from excess drink, although most observers would deem it otherwise. Gord signaled to Gellor, and the pair moved closer to see what was going to happen.

The newcomers were soon dispersed along the length of the place, joking, buying drinks, and talking. A bit of eavesdropping revealed that the fellows were ostensibly recruiting for their brigade of mercenaries. The sum being offered for enlistment—a lucky a head—was almost too good to be true, and vague promises of little fighting and much loot were too general to be real. That the recruiting was actual, however, could not be doubted, for a score or more were convinced and left with some of the newly arrived men to enlist immediately and get the coin—which would buy them another hundred drinks, or a wench, a jug, and plenty left for another carouse.

Gellor signaled to Gord to carefully watch the apparent leader, one who referred to himself as Flatchet. That one, and two others who looked like lieutenants, spent most of their time asking casual questions and listening attentively to the slurred replies, prompting now and then, and directing. That was indeed of note.

The pair moved closer, feigning being fairly under the weight of much strong ale. Soon both were part of a circle of people discussing the affairs of the Free Lords (as the rulers of the petty bandit states referred to themselves), and particularly the recent incursions of the Horned Society into Wormhall and Warfields, the two westernmost territories of the Bandit Kingdoms, which were both currently occupied by forces beholden to the evil Hierarchs. After the assemblage gave forth a smattering of oaths of

vengeance upon these dreaded masters of the Horned Society, talk turned to criticism of the desultory nature of the warfare being waged, ostensibly for the purpose of dislodging the invaders and impaling the puppet rulers they had placed over the conquered territories.

Then, with but a few words spoken with the air of one who knows, Flatchet planted in the listeners' minds the impression that it was the Tenha Host, not the Hierarchs of the Horned Society, that had really started the trouble. One of the bandits nodded agreement, stating that had the damned Tenhites not brought their bun-blasting cavalry across the Zumker River, thus invading the sovereign bandit states of Grosskopf and Fellands to the northeast, then no trouble with the up-till-then friendly Horned Society would have occurred.

Taw, one of the two lieutenants, asked why in hell everyone was mad at the Hierarchs anyway. After all, the Black Duke of Tenh held lands rightfully belonging to the Free Lords. The sodder had started the trouble, gained from it, and was getting off rover-free, while two former allies fought one another!

Agreement with this line of reasoning was emphatic and loud, and soon the whole place was passing the idea around and asking just what fighting with the Hierarchs did but help enemies like Urnst, the Shield Knights, and the hated Tenhites.

This revelation seemed totally new to the bandits, and the effect it had was startling. Gord thought that before another day passed, there would be mutterings all the way to Ratswharf about taking vengeance upon the Duke instead of fighting with their virtual cousins from across the Ritensa. Then, the talk came round to Gellor and Gord.

"You two seem pretty quiet," Flatchet noted. "How about allowing me the pleasure of refilling your jacks with our host's good ale, and telling us your line of work?"

Gellor did not speak up right away, but Gord was less reticent. "I am Gord," he said, "the captain of a small company of free-swords lately come here after visiting the Palish." Here he paused for a breath and grinned ruefully. "I was hoping to recruit a few men myself," he said. "The dirty dungeaters of the Pale took a few good friends from our company. It seems that you are better equipped with speech and coin than I, so you observe me listening and learning."

"What company is that?" Flatchet asked smoothly.

"Ever hear of the Grey Beggars?" Gord offered. When Flatchet showed no immediate sign of recognition, he continued. "No? Maybe you know some of the locals who were with us for a time. Finn? Bogodor?"

The questioner thought for a moment. "Finn… is he tall? Or a short one?"

"Tall. And Bogodor had a lot of orcish in him. Hard to forget, once you see him," Gord added with a touch of sarcasm.

"Yeah, those two I've heard of, but not the company," said Flatchet.

"No surprise," drawled Gord. "We came out of the Flinties where the Gamboge Forest meets 'em. Had to move north from there, though, because the Nyrondese were getting pissed at our successes."

"And you?" Flatchet asked, turning to Gord's companion.

"Me? I'm from Stoink, and I mind my own business," Gellor snapped.

"No need to get testy, friend," Flatchet said soothingly while signaling for more ale. "I'm just trying to round up likely men for the brigade, and you look prime!"

Gord again took the interplay to himself. "Any bonus for officering and bringing a score or two of hardies?" he asked.

"Veterans?"

"Nothing but, and likely closer to three score if the boys are having any luck recruiting over east 'round Onglewood and Blore."

"Triple shares for a captain, and double for his right hand, plus a common a head for every sword. You bring your Grey Beggars into the brigade, and you'll get your coin."

Gord looked pleased when Flatchet said that, and he then nodded toward Gellor. "My pal here is too modest," Gord began. "He's a hell of a scrapper and has… er… other talents to boot! Besides all that, he could get you near a dozen as good, I'll bet—right, Gellor? It's hard times in Stoink, right now."

The one-eyed thief looked sour at the suggestion, but said no word of denial. After pausing to give Gellor a chance to respond, Flatchet pumped him for more information.

"You as good with a sword as your friend says?" Taking his cue from Gellor's slow nod, Flatchet continued, "Can you get more like you?"

"Shit, half the thieves and rakes in the town will follow my lead," the one-eyed man said softly. "But why the hell should I want to go riding off with your brigade on some half-assed nothing of a raid into the blue?"

"I think I can trust a pair like you," the stranger said. Leaning closer and speaking in a conspiratorial tone with slurred tongue, Flatchet told them, "We are putting together a whole goddamned army, and we're gonna sack Redspan!"

Gord and Gellor looked at each other in shock. That was a most unlikely plan, for the town was heavily fortified, well garrisoned, and prepared to withstand siege. Besides, it was in Tenh, and who wanted a full-scale war with the able Tenha Host? They turned to stare at Flatchet, whose upper body was now beginning to weave. His expression was comic, a cross between wonderment over having divulged secret information and puzzlement, as though he was surprised over being so inebriated so quickly. The captain's eyes were beginning to cross. Gord, knowing that it wouldn't be long before he was beyond conversation, spoke quickly and loudly.

"Done then, Flatchet! I'll bring you the Grey Beggars, and Cyclops here will also furnish as many as he can," he said, and as he clapped the fellow on the back in comradery, he added, "The two hundred we can guarantee only if you sign us up now—and advance a bit of the coin!"

The other one of Flatchet's lieutenants was elsewhere, but Taw was nearby and listening casually. He turned his full attention to their table when he heard the thud of Flatchet's head as the captain slumped into unconsciousness. "Come here and help us," Gellor demanded of him. "This wily bastard has talked us into furnishing a full company, and now he's too loaded to sign us up and pay over the silver."

As Taw came near, Gord asked, "You do have the money, don't you? We'd take it ill indeed to be lied to."

Taw gave assurances of ability to pay and, with apologies for his captain's drunkenness, said he'd personally take care of the matter, providing that the two would help him get Flatchet safely to their bivouac nearby.

They assisted, of course, and in a short time had managed to get the now-comatose captain a few hundred paces to the field nearby where a collection of tents and hastily constructed shacks made up the recruiters' encampment area. From what was here, Gord surmised that the strength of the group already exceeded six hundred. Several pennons flapped idly in the breeze—it was too dark to identify them, but their presence did indicate that whole companies had been recruited. Perhaps they really did intend to attack Redspan….

Taw stopped before a hut, indicating that this was headquarters. After some fumbling, he opened the door while Gord and Gellor held up the unconscious Flatchet. A quick scraping of flint sent a shower of sparks onto tinder, and from the tiny flame a candle was lighted.

"Bring him in, and you can tell me what kind of deal you've worked out," called Taw.

"You bet," said Gellor. It was pitch black outside the door, but Gord sensed his companion's wink as they dragged their charge into the structure.

There were only two rooms, the bigger being first. It was cluttered with a long table, several chairs and stools, and a bench along the right wall. Taw led them through a crooked doorway and started another candle to illuminate the narrow chamber at the rear. Here they carried the seemingly dead Flatchet, only his faint breathing and the reek of stale beer indicating he was not in fact gone from this world. Without ado, they flopped him atop the cot in the room. Gord glanced around quickly, noting a large armoire, a campaign chest, a commode, and a cloak hanging from a peg near the door.

"The strain must be getting to him," remarked Taw, looking down at his captain.

"What?" said Gord.

Taw expanded on his remark. "Never seen Flatchet get so drunk that he's passed out on the job…. But then again, I've never seen him try anything this big."

"That's for sure," nodded Gellor. "Getting an army together to kick Palish ass out of Redspan is one hell of a big undertaking—especially when nobody is allowed to know what they're being hired for."

Taw appeared thunderstruck at Gellor's casual mention of the real purpose of the strangers' mission in Stoink. Gord broke in and spoke reassuringly, getting the conversation back on the right track.

"Let's get us signed up and that advance taken care of, okay, Taw?" he suggested. "I'll need all the time I can get to add another seventy men to my Grey Beggars, and Gellor here has his work cut out, too. Shit, we'd like to field three hundred for Flatchet, and maybe we can do that if we ever get started…."

But Taw was not easily distracted from his concern. "So he told you everything?" the lieutenant asked.

"Of course!" Gord piped up immediately. "We're in this too, as Flatchet saw when we agreed to join with everything we've got. When he told us

what was really going on, we upped the number. Hell, man, I'm sending one of my boys to see if he can locate Steel Jack's band!"

"Steel Jack?"

"Come on, Taw! You must have heard of him. He runs a bunch of brigands out of Nutherwood. Why, last I heard he had three hundred horse with a warlock to back him up!"

Taw looked impressed at that. Gathering his resolve, he went to the campaign chest, unlocked it, and took out a ledger volume and a small brass box. Holding these, he beckoned the other two to follow him back into the main room. Gord shut the door on the sleeping Flatchet as he departed.

After flipping the book open, Taw got a quill and an inkpot from the brass box. He had each man inscribe his name and his pledge of men in turn. Then, closing the register, he said, "Come back in the morning, and Flatchet will settle the payments you're to get."

"Gimme the book!" Gellor demanded.

"What for?"

"The deal was for here and now. You're not living up to it, so I'm crossing out my name. Tell that drunken stewpot in the morning that he's out my boys—and he has you to thank!"

"Hey, Gellor, don't be hasty," chimed in Gord. "Why don't we just cut the number of men we pledge in half and stay in? Nobody can bitch about that, right?"

Taw, looking pale, hastily added, "Sure, Gellor, don't be in a hurry to lose out on a nice bit of change—and lots more loot soon! Listen to your pal."

Gord and Gellor argued heatedly for a couple of minutes, and to Taw's distress, Gord began to come around to the one-eyed man's way of thinking. Seeing real trouble looming, Taw broke in just before he thought Gord was about to also demand removal of his own name and pledge of men.

"Flatchet said you two were going to be captains?"

"Lieutenants at first," answered Gord, "but when we offered to bring in two companies, he said we would be captains at five luckies per, plus a bounty based on the totals of our pledges, so we could have faith in you guys. Then he kicked in an advance to help us recruit."

"I haven't got that kind of cash now, fellows, honest. Tomorrow—"

"Too late," Gellor broke in. "We're out of this."

Gord and Gellor made to leave, but just then the second of Flatchet's lieutenants entered with a couple of recruits. With the arrival of his

comrade, Taw saw a way out of this fix, and told them to wait just a second. He pulled the other lieutenant, Swutch, into the bedchamber and closed the door. The two new recruits, tough and mean-looking, glared at Gord and his one-eyed companion. The looks they got in return caused the pair to gaze elsewhere until Taw and Swutch reentered the main room a couple of minutes later. Swutch quickly signed up the two cutthroats and hustled them out, barring the door on the inside as they left.

"You'd better be right," Swutch said ominously to Taw as the pair moved aside the heavy table, grabbed a plank, and heaved. A trapdoor, cleverly hidden, opened to reveal a cellar below.

Taw descended the steep stairway. Swutch motioned for Gord and Gellor to follow, and he came last, closing the trapdoor behind him. Taw's candle shed only a faint illumination, but he soon had another pair of thick tallow candles flaming, so that Gord was able to see the place clearly.

They were in an earthen cellar, fairly deep, with ledges built along the walls. It was originally a place for storage of roots and the like, now used as a repository for something far more valuable. Somehow Flatchet and his associates had managed to get a great iron trunk into this place. Gord was reminded of Theobald's strongbox—only this chest was at least ten times that size. Empty, it would weigh several hundred pounds, he guessed.

Taw stood in front of the chest, shielding what he was doing, but in a moment he had completed his secret manipulations. There was a grating noise as he turned the key, and then he called Swutch to help him with the lid. The pair lifted the slab of metal so that it rested at an angle against the dirt wall behind. Inside were more electrum, silver, and copper coins than Gord had seen in his life.

"Let's see," murmured Taw. "Each of you gets five luckies, and commons totaling three hundred, plus…"

Swutch turned back toward the recruits, just in time to get out a warning to his partner: "Look out!"

Gord attacked Swutch even as he spoke, his dagger glinting darkly in the pale light. Gellor, meanwhile, sprang forward to engage Taw, who pulled a heavy-bladed knife from his belt the moment his partner shouted the warning. The combat was noisy and protracted, but little if any of the sound would reach any listener above.

Gord wounded his opponent several times, taking only a small cut in return. Swutch wasn't nearly as skilled at dagger work as the young thief.

The lieutenant feinted a move toward the stair, leaped the other way, and struck out at one of the heavy candles, which went out. Gord understood his desire. In darkness, Gord's skill and acrobatic movements would be negated. The fight would become blind groping, striking at sounds. Swutch made another feint, hoping to drive Gord away so that he could extinguish the other candle. As he reversed himself toward the taper, Gord moved squarely into his path, and Swutch fell back, wounded again by the keen point of Gord's long dirk.

"Take it all!" Swutch cried. "Kill Taw if you have to, but let me go! I'll never be seen again—honest!" But even as the bandit lieutenant begged for his life, he hurled his blade. Gord sidestepped quickly, and the dagger, which had been headed for his throat, caught him in the shoulder instead. With Gord momentarily disabled, Swutch lunged for the stairs. He leaped to the fourth step, rushed upward, and strained to heave open the trapdoor. Two daggers struck him in rapid succession as he did so. The first was Gord's, the second Swutch's own—withdrawn from where it had stuck in Gord's left shoulder. That blow finished the would-be escapee, who slumped lifeless at the top of the stairway.

As he turned, Gord saw Gellor avoid a knife swipe and then lunge forward to strike Taw a tremendous blow to the temple with the pommel of his dagger. The bandit fell heavily. Gellor added a couple of blows with the blade of his weapon for good measure, then turned to Gord when he was satisfied that Taw was finished.

"Let me see that wound," Gellor said, moving close enough to examine where Swutch's blade had bitten into Gord's shoulder. "You're bleeding heavily, but you'll be all right," he said calmly as he reached into his belt-sack for a swatch of cloth.

The flow of blood was easily staunched, for the wound was clean and not terribly deep; Gord's padded doublet had taken much of the force away. Gellor bandaged the puncture with the surehandedness and swiftness of one who had done this sort of thing often before.

"It'll pain you for a few days, and unless you get a cleric to take care of it, you'll have to get someone to sew it shut, but you'll survive." He was grinning as he said that, and Gord smiled broadly in return.

"Let's get that coin and get out!"

Both men began quickly separating the coins. Copper went onto the dirt floor, silver to one side of the chest, electrum to the other. Eventually, they

had the stuff roughly divided, and then it was time to load it up. Using the shirts of the two lieutenants, they created makeshift sacks for the luckies, tossing in a few of the silver nobles to complete each load.

"That was inspired, Gord. Good thing for you I'm fast on the uptake," Gellor said as they bent to the sorting of coins. Then he paused and looked at his companion. "What made you think of this? I saw you put the drug in Flatchet's ale, but the rest was one of the best-planned deceptions I've seen in a long time!"

While Gord kept working on the loot, he told Gellor that the powder was something used by the Rhennee. Then he explained his thinking. "I could tell that Flatchet was lying through his teeth—he isn't very clever, and certainly not smart. Whatever he's doing, he's been set up, I think, and he's in way above his head—Hey, Gellor! Take a look at this!"

Gellor looked down into the huge iron box. "You've hit the bottom," he said. "Let's get going."

"No, take another look at the bottom. It's about half a foot too shallow!"

Gellor reached down, put the fingers of one hand on the floor of the iron container, then extended his outside arm down to the floor. "Right you are! Let's find the secret panel."

With that, they two thieves began a careful and painstaking scrutiny of the great trunk. Gord spotted where access to the hidden space beneath the false bottom could be gained and called his comrade's attention to it. Both examined the place minutely.

"Don't screw around with it, Gord. Those tiny scratches are some sort of magical runes—and there's at least one needle trap here, too. See the hole? It's time to take what we've got and clear out."

"I've got another idea to try before we give up," said Gord.

"Help me tip this thing so it's bottom up, and I'll show you something you're going to like."

Gellor shook his head in doubt and disagreement, but he took a hold on the chest and assisted Gord in standing it on its side. Coins spilled out and rolled across the hard-packed earth. Gord tugged the lid shut, and the pair levered the big box to rest on its top. A rusty slab of iron covering the underside of the trunk presented itself to view.

"Now what?" Gellor asked sarcastically as he watched Gord draw his dagger. Then he gaped when he saw Gord's dagger-point scribing a shallow

gash in the metal bottom. "What the hell you got there, Gord? I've never seen a blade cut like that before!"

Gord merely grinned through his clenched teeth as he pressed harder on the weapon. A couple of more strokes, and he had made a squarish set of lines about an eighth of an inch deep in the iron. With these to guide his work, the young thief began to make gouging motions with the weapon, so that the dagger's blade passed back and forth along the channels, from one to another. It was like a normal knife blade cutting oak—slow work, but certain to succeed. In minutes the task was done. The square of metal clattered down into the place between false bottom and real one. There was, as predicted, a half-foot space beneath. Gellor brought a candle near, and golden light was reflected back in its flickering illumination.

Using utmost care, the two proceeded to gather up the stuff hidden in the false bottom of the chest. The orbs there were bright yellow gold all right, but each bore the horned and crowned death's head of the Hierarchs on its face, with a coiled serpent on the obverse. With these coins were a soft leather bag and a tube of bone. The two thieves tucked the small bag and the coins in with the rest of their booty, and soon after that they had managed to open the tube.

"Gord, those deviates could have put this here as part of the protections…."

"I've heard of such things, Gellor, but cursed or not, we must examine it. Anything to do with the Horned Society is likely to bode ill for us anyway."

Without further hesitation, the one-eyed thief unrolled the parchment within the cylinder, while Gord moved beside him so as to be able to read it too. What was there was nothing magical at all, nor was it a map. It was simply a set of instructions written clearly in Common. After scanning it quickly, Gellor replaced it in the tube and tucked that into his belt. The two men exchanged a few quick words about what they would do next, then turned the iron chest back upright. Gord picked up both of the shirt-sacks stuffed with coins and went upstairs. Gellor followed him a couple of minutes later, dragging the body of Swutch with him. He took it into Flatchet's bedroom, dropping it near the still-comatose body of the bandit captain. During this time, Gord had been piling straw from the floor of the bedchamber around the base of the dry wooden walls of the hut. As Gellor returned from the cellar with Taw's body, Gord was applying a candle flame to several spots along the mound of straw. Then Gord and Gellor picked up

their loot and let themselves out, closing the door on the flames that were beginning to lick at the walls. They scooped up the registry volume and hastened outside. A faint whitening of the horizon told them that dawn would come soon. They were entering the Towergate of Stoink when it did.

Chapter 17

The great hall of the lord mayor's palace was aglitter with candles and flambeaux. The crowd within was a sparkling array of the elite of Stoink. His Authoritative Lordship Dhaelhy led the festivities, and with him were the various ward leaders, clerics, guildmasters, and other officials who were his liegemen. Attendant to all, of course, were entourages of guards, retainers, servants, and females—grand ladies as well as other sorts. The half-hundred important men, with thrice that number of others in service to them, plus the palace guards and staff, nearly filled the huge chamber. The crowd of lesser bureaucrats and minor leaders of Stoink and its environs brought the crowd to near three hundred.

Long trestle tables were arrayed in the hall, and these boards groaned with the weight of the food and drink upon them. The major domo slammed his ceremonial staff down on a wooden platform constructed so as to issue a booming sound when so struck. At this sound, minstrels ceased their strumming and singing, and jongleurs ceased their tricks, as did the capering jester. A hush fell over the place, for Boss Dhaelhy was about to speak.

"Lords and ladies, masters and mistresses," (a few titters) "gentlefolk… welcome to this palace!" (Cheers and applause.) "You are commanded here to celebrate because I have just saved Stoink from disaster!" (Louder cheers and heavy clapping.) "*Wait.*.. wait… There is more than that. I have strengthened our state, and assured its preeminent position as leader of the Alliance of the States of the Free Lords!"

This last announcement precipitated such a tumult of applause and cheering that Boss Dhaelhy stood silently for several minutes, hands raised, basking in the adulation. At his signal, the major domo again made the hall boom to his staff, and the assemblage was again hushed. The boss continued.

"I discovered a most wicked plot by our former allies, the Hierarchs of the Horned Society." (Catcalls, hisses, boos, jeers, and whistles.) "Those bastards would embroil us with the cursed Tenha Host, and with us most of the Free Lords of the East, while their filth-devouring legions ran unopposed over our Brothers to the West!" The boss and lord mayor paused here, but the listeners made little noise, for the impact of his statement was being assessed. Then he resumed.

"I discovered this scheme, and brought its leaders low. The agents of the Hierarchs were here—yes, here in Holdroon! They are dead now, their warchest a part of our treasury, and the men-at-arms they recruited with deceit and lies now serve me! Soon I ride with them to Riftcrag. There, a Grand Council of Free Lords will meet, and there we will pursue our crusade to remove the Hierarchs' troops from Warfields and Wormhall… and I shall be Chief of Lords!"

Dhaelhy beamed as a storm of wild jubilation swept through the crowd and filled the hall with such noise that even the most strenuous beating of the mace-butt on the drum boards could not be heard above the din. A magic-user in the back took the opportunity to cause an illusion of appropriate nature to appear. A line of chained hobgoblins clanked through the suddenly opened doors of the chamber. Each carried the head of a human on a golden platter, and each bloody head was crowned with a horned coronet. This file of captives and grisly trophies was guarded by huge soldiers in black armor, armed with halberds and wearing the blazon of Stoink—a white field embellished with an azure bend, and a golden spear superimposed over all. As this procession entered, heralds blew silver trumpets likewise decorated with armorial bearings. The throng quieted as everyone turned to watch the spectacle. The audience applauded when the hobgoblin captives hurled the heads down at the table before the boss, and each gory pate dissolved into a shower of golden coins and raihbow-hued jewels. The mace drummed again, the illusion vanished, and the onlookers were again silent.

"There is just a little more, dear peers and subjects. I did not accomplish this all alone. Faithful men served to assist, and we are here not only to celebrate my triumph, but to share with these subjects Our glory and accomplishment!" Subdued remarks as to the generosity and magnanimity of the Boss accompanied the applause that followed this remark.

"The Honored Guests of the revel are here, near me. I present them to you all: Gellor, a magsman of Our Thieves' Guild, and his associate, Gord, a freesword late of Leukish and likewise a member of Our Guild. It is Our decision that each be given honor hereafter as Deputy Bailiffs and Subalterns of the Constabulary Guard!"

There was polite applause and a few raised eyebrows at this, for the boss never gave out such positions unless something big had been done by the recipients. Deputy Bailiff status literally meant a license to steal, and that

office, as well as that of the Guard, bore remuneration that even after payoffs and kickbacks would amount to five or six luckies a month—for no work. The pair now standing and inclining their heads bore watching by each of the assembled officials, either as potential rivals or possible climbers whose friendship could be useful. Then His Authoritative Lordship signaled for the festivities to continue, and the revelers were soon engaged in eating, drinking, and conversation once again.

Gord was seated next to the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and all of his attention was on her. Evaleigh was her name, Lady Evaleigh. Her hair of pale platinum and her violet eyes bespoke elvish blood—perhaps from a grandparent or great-grandparent. Gord could not guess which and anyway cared for nothing save the result.

Evaleigh was gowned in velvet of the same color as her eyes, and the low bodice of the dress revealed the perfect symmetry of her creamy breasts. Gord found himself staring at the single amethyst nestled between these hemispheres and wishing he were that pendant. When she turned to speak with him, her long tresses, bound by a fillet of thin gold, rippled as silk stirred by a soft breeze. It was difficult for Gord to understand what she said because her full mouth and soft lips fascinated his eyes to such an extent that his audial senses seemed out of touch with his brain.

The young woman's face was somewhat drawn, however, and Gord saw great sadness behind the beauty of her eyes. Evaleigh demonstrated no particular enjoyment of the banquet celebration, no happiness in being at the boss' head table, no pleasure at the flirtation and compliments from the officials and influential men who sought her attention. Gord wanted to be alone with her, and he finally decided give voice to his thoughts, in the hope that he could improve her disposition—and give himself some pleasure, too—by taking her away from the table.

"May I ask Your Ladyship to stroll in the park gardens?" he said, a bit nervously in spite of himself.

"You must ask Lordship Dhaelhy, for I am his charge, and unless I have his permission I can go nowhere," she replied with a faint smile.

Did her flute-like voice offer hope, or discouragement? Gord was uncertain, but he determined to play it out. "Thank you, Lady Evaleigh, for your intelligence. Pardon me that I knew not you were the ward of His Authoritative Lordship, Boss Dhaelhy. I am new to the town, you know. I shall ask permission at once."

Although they were being honored, Gellor and Gord were not seated next to the potentate of the city state, but rather two and three places respectively from him. Seeing that the great lord was engrossed in discussion with a rat-faced man to his left, Gord signaled a varlet behind his chair to come to Gord's place. The surly man, dressed in a soiled tabard that identified him as one of the lord mayor's staff, came over slowly, but Gord did not berate him for insolence. Instead, he slipped a common into the fellow's hand and whispered instructions in his ear. The servant grinned, nodded, and went back to his station.

A minute later, the fellow managed to slide into a pause in his master's conversation and murmur Gord's request. Boss Dhaelhy turned and met Gord's eyes. He was smiling broadly, but Gord read hard assessment in the gaze. Then the varlet said something else in his master's ear that made Lord Dhaelhy's great jowls shake with laughter.

"Gentle Gord, Our new Subaltern, your request to accompany Lady Evaleigh on a stroll through the palace gardens is granted—on three conditions!"

Everyone else at the table turned to stare at Gord. Evidently, he had done something amiss, but he was not abashed. He responded quickly and firmly. "Your conditions, My Lord, are my orders."

"Well said, lad! Here are Our con—orders, then. First, Her Ladyship must agree." At this, everyone laughed, although Gord was sure that there was jealousy behind some of the mirthful expressions. "Second, you must guard her from all harm and return her to Us immediately after your exercise and fresh air are done. Third, and last, you must return her intact, for she is a virgin, and without her maidenhead, her value to Us plummets!"

At that, raucous sounds, ribald laughter, and rude jests filled the whole of the great hall. Gord, surprised at these statements, was slightly amused himself, until he saw Evaleigh's blush of anger and humiliation. There was something here he must learn, and quickly, if he was to attain his most desired goal, the fair damsel's heart—and attendant parts, of course!

"Thank you, Your Authoritative Lordship. Consider all to be as you command."

Then Gord turned and smiled reassuringly at Evaleigh, saying as he did so, "I seem to be as much a butt of this cruel joke as you, lady. I humbly crave your pardon for unwittingly subjecting you to such discomfort. It is now my fervent wish that I had never asked, but since I have, and His

Lordship of Stoink has generously given permission, I now ask again: Will you allow me to accompany you on a walk of the grounds? It is loud and hot in the hall."

Evaleigh searched his face for a brief moment before responding. "I thank you, Sir, for your kindness, and I most readily accept."

They were soon strolling through the gardens of the palace, alone save for a pair of guards following some distance behind and occasional sentries they encountered keeping their appointed rounds. Gord slowly toured the park with Evaleigh's arm in his, keeping the conversation light and impersonal. She played her part too, commenting on the fragrance of the night-blooming flowers and shrubs and asking Gord small questions about himself. As they entered a grassy circle, Gord stopped and peered upward at the myriad stars and the two moons, the pale one shedding full beams upon them, the small blue one little more than a thin crescent, rising. His pausing so caused Evaleigh to do the same, and as both stood gazing at the heavens, their escort remained a considerable ways off, hidden in the deep shadows of the hedges.

Gord seized the opportunity. "My lady, what is it that troubles you so?" he asked.

"Captivity is a hard burden to bear, sir," she replied with a tinge of hardness in her musical voice.

"Durance, lady, is vile indeed, but it is you who hold my heart captive!" he said, speaking softly but with sincerity. "Being a ward of the master of all around us is not captivity, but rather privilege!"

Evaleigh glared at him. "Take back those words, sir," she said, "or I swear I shall have revenge for your taunting me so!"

This response nearly left Gord speechless. The vehemence of this wonderful woman was undeniable. He hastened to make amends. "Again, I am at a severe disadvantage, fair lady," he said as graciously as he could. "Do not become angry at me for some ignorance on my part. Be generous and kind, I beg of you! Tell me the cause of your anger, the source of what discommodes you, and I shall pledge myself to serve to remedy all and make right what you view as wrong, even at the cost of my very life!"

Now it was Evaleigh who appeared taken aback. For a long moment she looked into the young man's eyes, searching his countenance, contemplating. Then, at last, she spoke. "Gord, I may have misjudged you. Know you who I am?"

"Only, fair Evaleigh, that you are the most gorgeous woman ever to have walked our Oerth's thus blessed soil, and the one for whom I would most gladly die!"

"Spare me these plights, Gord, no matter how sincerely meant and well-spoken. Answer me directly: Do you know who I am?"

"The woman of my dreams, the one I love, the charge of Lord Dhaelhy…. That is the full recital!"

Evaleigh slipped her small hand into Gord's as he spoke thus. Standing close and staring into his face, she asked, "And that is all?"

"On everything I honor and cherish, lady, that is all."

"Then hear what I am about to relate…."

Within a few moments, Gord had the essence of her story. Evaleigh was a captive, being held for ransom by Stoink. Her land was far to the east, and her father was Dunstan, Count of Blemu and Lord of Knurl. Boss Dhaelhy was keeping her intact, as it were, pending a reply from her father to a demand of ten thousand orbs for Evaleigh's safe return to her home. Time was beginning to grow short, for several months had passed without response from the Noble Grace of Blemu. Unless she was ransomed soon, Evaleigh would be sold off to the leader of Rookroost, Plar Teoud Fent, who had offered Dhaelhy treasure and alliance for her. To be sure, ten thousand gold pieces outweighed the sums proffered by Rookroost, vague alliances aside, but meat in the pot was worth far more than magic in the promise, as they said. Thus, the upshot was that Evaleigh was bound for the tender mercies of concubinage of the Plar unless her father's emissaries soon reached Stoink… or fate intervened!

"Sold? They would sell you?" said Gord when her downcast eyes told him that her tale was told.

"As surely as my father fails to pay my ransom."

"No one can sell you, Evaleigh. You're a baroness—and the most beautiful girl in the world!"

"Don't raise your voice so," she cautioned softly. "And thank you, Gord."

"Don't thank me yet, dear lady. Wait until Stoink is behind us, and then you may say thus."

Evaleigh looked up at him for a moment, the moonlight making her eyes gleam marvelously. Gord was unused to looking down upon a woman, for his height was such that most girls were nearer to par with him. But this gorgeous creature stood only an inch over five feet, and Gord felt like a

hero already as she silently beseeched him to make good his intimation of rescue.

"We must return to the palace now, or they will become suspicious," Evaleigh said, moving away from him toward the pathway leading to the hall. She still held his hand, lightly, and Gord moved to retain the contact.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"Never, unless you make the opportunity," she whispered. "Do you think that pig in there allows anyone as young and handsome as you to be near me?"

Handsome… she had called him that! Gord felt as though he were floating above the ground, as tall as a titan. "I shall soon devise a way then!" he responded with great vigor.

"I'll pray it is so," Evaleigh said, and gave him a soft little kiss on the cheek, so swiftly and briefly that the guards did not see, and even Gord was uncertain for an instant that it had, in fact, happened. "We approach the sty, so I can no longer be civil, but you are my champion!"

Stiff and straight, Evaleigh entered the palace ahead of Gord. Without another word, she was gone, leaving Gord to return to the celebration. The great hall was only slightly less crowded. Trestles removed, the revelers were now engaged in serious drinking, while a motley assortment of entertainers performed in various parts of the long chamber. As he approached the place of honor, Gellor sidled up to him.

"Your face is as long as a troll's snout, Gord," his companion said. "Better put another expression on it, or the boss might be offended."

"Screw him!" Gord spat.

"Oh, ho! So Lady Evaleigh has scored a conquest, has she?"

"Leave her out of this, Gellor!"

Without showing any umbrage, the one-eyed thief took Gord firmly by the arm and halted his progress toward Lord Dhaelhy's dais. "For your continued health, listen!" he said. "That woman is a treasure of great value, and guarded thus. If a man sees one who is desirous of stealing his wealth, he acts—get my meaning? Now smile, relax, and we'll hoist a few tankards! We're honored guests, you know, and likely to get some companionship from the ambitious ladies here."

Gord still looked sour, but he slowly nodded acceptance of the advice. "Thanks, Gellor. You're right," he said, regaining his composure as he did so.

"Good. I hear that Evaleigh is bound for Rookroost in a few days anyway."

Chapter 18

A patch of shadow detached itself from the dark space between two of the buildings. For a brief moment only it seemed manlike in shape as it moved swiftly and noiselessly across the starlit courtyard. Then it was gone, enveloped in the umbra of the other structure toward which it had drifted. Only a bat had seen the shadow-figure, and it cared nothing about it. Sharp-eyed sentries hired for their ability to see well in darkness had noticed nothing, and the squad of soldiers that passed the area a few seconds later noticed the bat flutter overhead, but saw no more.

Gord was clad in black, head covered by a soft felt cap of inky hue, face smeared with lamp soot, hands gloved in ebon leather. Long training and practice enabled him to move without noise, and this silent progress was but a part of his skill. Clad as he was, Gord could become virtually invisible, using small projections, indentations, and shadow to conceal his presence.

It had been an easy matter for him to scale the wall around the complex, ease down the other side, and then disappear among the buildings of the fortresslike compound within which the lord of Stoink dwelled and the city's government was administered. However, crossing the broad expanse of Hall Street a few moments earlier had not been quite so simple, for there were late-night passersby out strolling, and sentries on the outer wall before him to be contended with. Gord had utilized a passing night-soil cart, smelly as it was, to mask his approach, and then he had been forced to remain frozen, prone against the base of the wall, until a group of off-duty guards quit conversing with their fellows atop the wall and went on their way up Safe Avenue.

The outer wall of the building he was adjacent to had many projecting stones and cracks. Gord's ascent was much the same as that of a normal person climbing a ladder—although a normal person attempting such a climb as the young thief made would find it next to impossible. Once atop the structure, he continued his oblique progress toward the palace, moving up and down as easily as normal folk went back and forth along the ground. He utilized the concealment of another nearby building, then the south inner wall, to move west to where he could easily see the palace's tall turrets and towers showing faint black silhouettes against the pale stars. Once, Gord had to hang by his fingertips over a ledge as a sentry slowly paced by. Then he was scrambling up at a juncture where the lower wall of the administrative compound met the higher barrier around the palace proper.

Now he must be doubly careful, for this area was teeming with guards. The inner bailey of the castlelike palace was only twenty or so feet below him, although the drop to the park on the outer side was over thirty. The palace was built on a small hill, and the ground had been terraced long ago to make the place into a stronghold capable of withstanding siege. As a sentry approached, Gord hung at arms' length over the inside of the wall and allowed himself to drop. His fall, roll, and recovery made little more than a whisper and soft thump. Shadow hid his position, and the patrolling soldier continued on along the top of the wall, unaware that an intruder was within the place.

Understanding that he may well encounter magical as well as flesh-and-blood protections, Gord had opted for a bold plan. He ran along the base of the palace wall, for the bailey was deserted, and the darkness hid his motion. Where the angle of the wall met the great tower at the southwestern end of the palace proper, he sprang upward and stood upon the tiny ledge provided by the arch of the locked portal beneath.

Unmoving, hardly breathing as he plastered his body against the stone, Gord watched the bronzewood gate open and light spill out into the compound. A half-dozen guards came out, the door was banged shut, and the group walked away toward their barracks tower, chatting. Their torches might have revealed Gord's presence, if any of the soldiers had bothered to look behind and up. In another minute, Gord was halfway up the tower, moving with speed verging on recklessness. However, he made the ascent without a slip, and about sixty feet up he moved off onto the steeply pitched roof of the great hall. Another guardsman on the tower's top, thirty feet above, was dozing and witnessed nothing.

Pausing near a small turret at the northeastern end of the roof, Gord silently unstrapped his ebon-hued backpack. He pulled a dark cloth out of it and carefully removed all traces of black from his visage. Next he divested himself of his black outer garments, then got out and put on a surcoat identifying him as a junior officer of the Constabulary Guard, the body of men-at-arms whose duty it was to protect this very place. He pulled out and strapped on his shortsword, then stuffed the black garb into the pack, which he left tucked into a niche where none but the birds and bats would see it.

Now for the hard part, he thought, taking a deep breath and thrusting open a small door that gave into a circular room.

"Rotten Ralishaz!" a dice-playing guardsman exclaimed at Gord's sudden appearance before him. The three other men seated at the rough table looked equally taken aback.

"Who is in charge here?" demanded Gord, looking angry and official.

One fellow sprang up instantly, the others a bit more slowly, until they realized that an officer was before them. Normally the guards—and most of their commanders—were pretty lax, but this unfamiliar officer before them could mean big trouble. They were supposed to be patrolling the rooftop, watching for possible threats to Boss Dhaelhy's security. And now they had been nailed by an officer, albeit a most junior one, playing at knucklebones in obvious dereliction of their duty. Not one of them wanted to speculate on the consequences of this, if indeed the man before them had been sent by the boss to check on how really secure the palace was.

The first man who had stood assumed a sloppy sort of posture of attention and responded meekly. "I am in charge, sir," he said. "Corporal Mender. Sir, I can explain about the game…."

"Shut up, asshole!" Gord commanded. "You listen, I'll talk! Lucky for you dumbshits that Commander Oakert it was sent me, not the Boss himself."

Gord gave them a minute to let that sink in. Commander Oakert was in charge of all the guards on night duty this month. He was not a lovable man at best, and he hated night duty. He'd just been posted to it as a way of letting him know that his master was displeased with him for not finding out about the plot of the Hierarchs. Oakert had been chief of spying before. All this was common knowledge among the guards and other employees of the palace, and they also knew that the commander would do anything he could to get back into the good graces of Lord Dhaelhy—including exposing the men under his command who were slacking in their duties.

"But we—"

"Shut up!" interrupted Gord. "I'm supposed to be here catching you jerks and placing you on report so that the commander can look good. Well, I don't mind telling you that I'm a new boy here, and I don't like that sort of crappy deal at all. Oakert will end up looking great, I'll get a nasty reputation, and one day I'll happen to slip and fall off a wall, or have some other accident, and that will be that."

The four guards looked at each other and couldn't keep from grinning knowingly at what the subaltern just said. Piss off the troops, and things did

have a way of happening—perhaps not to captains and commanders, but certainly to subalterns.

"Wipe those damn smirks off your ugly pusses!" Gord raved at them. "Any more of that behavior, and I'll be tempted to take my chances with an accident. Get your asses out of here and on your rounds! Nobody was goofing off in here when I checked, understand?"

"Yessir," the guards muttered in unison, and then they were gone in a scuffle and a slam of the roofway door.

Gord looked around the room, smiling at the ease of his success, then spied a trapdoor in the floor and pulled it open. In another few minutes, he was walking briskly along the torchlit corridors of the palace's upper floors, looking very busy and official. None of the various persons he encountered took any suspicious notice of him. In fact, the only ones who seemed to notice him at all were a pair of guards at the entrance to Lord Dhaelhy's wing. They came to attention smartly as Gord passed. Tossing off a distracted salute in reply, he strode past, and that was that.

There was but a single man-at-arms on duty at the entrance to the great tower. Waving his papers vaguely at the guard, Gord went through and up the stairs there without being questioned. The uppermost storey was where Evaleigh was kept as "guest" of Boss Dhaelhy. Another guard was before the door to her chamber—a serjeant who looked professional and mean.

Gord took a chance. "Is that door locked?" he demanded.

"Yes… sir," the sentry replied, adding the honorific as he measured the junior officer before him, and saw danger in not responding with deference.

"Then open it, Serjeant. I am here on the order of His Authoritative Lordship."

"At midnight?" The man was uncertain, but not easily moved.

"Are you on guard duty? Or posted to tell your superiors the time of night?" Gord allowed the anger he truly felt to rise within him. "Open that door, or I'll have you on report for insubordination!"

"Yessir. May I see the order from His Lordship?"

Gord was prepared. "I assume you can read, Serjeant," he said sarcastically, pulling a square of parchment from within his coat and handing it to the guard.

The fellow took the document without comment, noted that it was an order for the immediate removal of Lady Evaleigh to Boss Dhaelhy's apartments, and signed by Commander Oakert.

"Well?" said Gord impatiently, after scarcely giving the guard enough time to absorb the contents of the parchment.

"This is in order, sir. I'll have the door unlocked in just a moment."

"Hurry, damn you! If I am questioned as to why I am tardy by Commander Oakert, or His Lordship, the Boss, you'll be the one to hear! Serjeant…"

"Serjeant Melson, sir—Black Melson," he added hastily as he turned the great lock and pushed on the iron-bound panel to open it.

"Stay at your post. I'll get the lady and be out as quickly as possible," Gord said with a steely voice that brooked no further word from the sentry.

The room beyond was a salon, with a thick rug on the floor and several divans and other furniture. A serving maid slept on one of these couches. Gord walked over to her and woke her none too gently, causing the woman to give a small, startled squeak.

"Go to your mistress, Lady Evaleigh. Inform her that His Authoritative Lordship Dhaelhy commands her presence in five minutes. Tell her she must be dressed for travel, but without any baggage or impediment."

The maid got up without a word and turned toward the door of her mistress' chamber.

"You may inform her that Subaltern Gord is to be her escort," the young thief added.

"Subaltern who, sir?" inquired the still-drowsy servant.

"Gord…. Tell her Subaltern Gord."

"Very well, sir. Subaltern Gord. I shall tell Lady Evaleigh just that. Five minutes, you say?" She bustled into the next room, leaving the question hanging in thin air.

Not more than ten minutes elapsed before Evaleigh and her maid appeared through the door. Gord had been pacing nervously but silently, pausing often to listen at the outer portal for any sign of possible trouble. He breathed a sigh of released tension when he heard the two women approaching the salon. Then, at the instant he saw her, Evaleigh's eyes met his, and Gord felt a strange flow of energy within him—a force that made his heart sing and his muscles weak at the same time. He shook it off, forcing his mind to remain on the matters at hand.

"Woman," he said, addressing the maid, "I have no instructions as to you. Wait here until someone comes to fetch you or tell you otherwise. Go back to sleep, do your duties, whatever."

"If it's all the same to you, Subaltern Gord, I'll just go back to sleep."

Gord gave the servant a black look, keeping in character, and then turned to Evaleigh. "Your Ladyship, are you ready to be escorted to His Authoritative Lordship?"

"I am, subaltern," Evaleigh answered coldly. "Bless you, dear Goldie, for being a friend during this time," she said as she hugged the woman. "I shall miss you—I hope!"

At that the maid laughed briefly and squeezed Evaleigh in return. "Godspeed," she said softly and somberly. Then she turned away and headed back to her couch.

Evaleigh was clad in a greatcloak of dark gray. The hood was thrown back, showing a lining of rose-colored silk to keep the coarse wool from touching tender skin. What she wore beneath this garment, Gord could only suppose, although he noted that she was shod in soft leather boots with stout soles. Again his eyes met hers.

"Well, soldier, are we to stand here and keep Lord Dhaelhy waiting? Or are we to get on with it?"

"This way, Your Ladyship," Gord said with a slight wink. "We must hurry—we are late already," he added as he pulled the door open.

The guard outside the door allowed them to pass his station, but after closing the door behind them he took a couple of tentative steps along their route as though intending to accompany them. Upon hearing the unwanted footsteps, Gord paused and looked back over his shoulder toward the guard. "Remain on duty here, Serjeant, until you are properly relieved," he barked.

"Yessir," the fellow answered briskly. He gave Gord a salute and returned to his post.

"Come along, Your Ladyship. The Boss does not wait well," said Gord as he picked up speed down the stairway. Evaleigh's feet fairly skipped to keep up, and she squeezed his arm tightly—not entirely for the purpose of keeping the pace.

"Where do we actually go?" she asked in a conspiratorial voice.

"I'm really not sure of that," Gord replied candidly. "There was no time for me to work out a proper plan, so as soon as I managed to find a means of freeing you from your prison room, I came ahead, figuring that luck and skill would take care of the rest."

"You dare to risk my well-being on luck?!" It was an accusation more than a question, voiced as she released her hold on his arm.

Gord took a hasty look at Evaleigh. She was definitely not pleased with him now, as was borne out all too plainly by her expression. He replied softly. "Better to have left you for sale to Plar Rookroost? Shall we turn back, then?" As he voiced the second query, Gord slowed his steps.

"Don't be a clod! Of course we won't return—ever! Just get me out of this prison, and see to my safety," Evaleigh said with great feeling. Then she took his arm again and said, "Do forgive me, Gord, I am frightened and alone save for you. What will become of me if we are discovered? If you are killed? I am but a weak girl and desperate for assistance!"

Returning to a hurried pace of descent, Gord smiled at the beautiful lady holding his arm. "Evaleigh, I will see to our escape," he said fervently, "or die in the trying!"

"Do not think of death, Gord—only freedom," Evaleigh responded, regaining her resolve.

In their descent, Gord and Evaleigh got safely past the archway of the third floor, where the master of the palace resided. But now that they had deviated from the path that would have taken them to Boss Dhaelhy's chambers, Gord knew he would not be able to talk himself out of any situation they might encounter on the lower floors. Gord began to move more slowly and deliberately now, looking and listening carefully for signs of activity. Suddenly, the faint sound of tramping feet coming from above caused him to stop short and turn his attention upward. The sound was getting louder by the second, and it was unmistakably being made by a squad of men-at-arms in the third-floor corridor heading for this very stair.

Gord grabbed Evaleigh's arm and nearly threw her off balance as he resumed their downward flight. "Guards are coming this way," he hissed. "Hurry, and be as silent as possible."

Evaleigh made no reply, only picked up her pace to match his. She strained to land on the balls of her feet, to make her footfalls as silent as leather on stone could be. The marching sound behind continued to increase in volume. Fortunately, the pair was out of sight of anyone on the landing above, having made two full turns on this part of the stairway already. The clumping sound reached the landing and then divided into two parts. Some of the guards were moving up, but other steps were coming down the stairway in their direction.

"They'll soon discover your absence," Gord whispered. "We must now hope that fortune favors us, for a hue and cry will sound in minutes."

The girl nodded, panting from the exertion of the rapid descent. They passed the main floor without discovery and continued down. The stairs at basement level were still illuminated by flaming cressets, so they had no difficulty seeing their way. Still the tramping footfalls followed them, so Gord and Evaleigh went on to the deeper level beneath the cellar. Now the steps were damp and slippery, and only one dim flambeau shed its wavering light for them. Gord again slowed to a more careful rate of descent, fearing that if he did not, Evaleigh would make a misstep and tumble headlong. They had put a good bit of distance between themselves and the approaching guards, so the more cautious pace was safe enough as far as discovery from above was concerned—at least for a short time.

They passed several doors as they continued downward to a depth that surprised Gord. The foundation of the great tower must have been dug down to a depth of more than sixty feet! At last they came to a place where the steps ended, and they stood before the entrance to a large chamber. Columns and arches were dimly visible in the light of the cresset at the end of the subterranean stairway. Here was a dark expanse containing who knew what. It offered temporary shelter, however, for the pillars of this vault formed a veritable maze.

"Take my hand," Gord commanded as he extended his left arm toward Evaleigh. She did so, and then he led her cautiously into the darkness between a pair of nearby columns. There was no sound of pursuit from above, and Gord paused so that Evaleigh could regain her breath.

"What now?" she asked. "Is there a way out?"

"Other than the way we came, I know not," Gord answered, meanwhile digging under his surcoat. "Blast this rag!" he said, pulling the garment off and stuffing it into a space between stones nearby.

"That's better," he muttered, and he opened the pouch at his waist and drew out a tinderbox and a small candle. In a moment he had the candle wick aflame. He instructed Evaleigh to remain concealed near the stairway and he began to move slowly about the chamber. After a few minutes of careful exploring, Gord learned that the vault they were in covered more area than the tower they had just left. This sub-basement extended elsewhere under the palace itself and off at an angle that seemed to run east.

Just as Evaleigh's soft cry to Gord reached his ears, he too heard the sound that caused her alarm. What had begun as a faint clamor from above was rapidly growing in volume and intensity. In a scant few seconds, as he

moved to where Evaleigh could see him, Gord sized up the situation: It was most probable that the loss of the Boss' prize captive had been discovered, and now the hunt was on.

"Come here quickly!" barked the young man. As soon as Evaleigh reached him, Gord led her into the passage that angled away from the building complex, hoping that they would find some means of egress along the route.

Evaleigh shuddered and pressed close to him, for there were cobwebs, bugs, spiders, and rats aplenty in the dank corridor. That there was occasional traffic here seemed evident, however, by the lack of webs obstructing the center. That meant that it was unlikely they would encounter anything really formidable inside the passage—and besides, at the moment, Gord feared no creatures other than pursuing men-at-arms.

The candle flickered uncertainly in the breeze caused by their movement, and its illumination was feeble at best. Despite this, they traversed several hundred feet of the passageway without mishap before being brought up short before a rusty, iron door. Recalling the layout of the palace, Gord guessed that they were at the base of the middle tower of the wall that formed the compound of the fortress.

The door was meant to be barred on this side, but the iron rod was simply leaning against the wall of the corridor. Gord tried to pull open the small portal with as much effort as he could muster, but it would not budge; it was certainly held fast by a bar on its other side. Shrugging, Gord picked up the unused rod and rammed it in place.

"That should prevent unwanted visitors from this end," he said with forced cheerfulness. "Now we had better backtrack and look for a door we can get through."

Evaleigh's grim expression melted into a thin smile for a moment as they began retracing their steps. After they had gone only a few dozen paces, they heard from ahead the clang of bare steel on stone, followed almost instantly by a great hammering at the iron door behind them. There were guards coming toward them, and soldiers from the tower beyond assaulting the barred portal—they were trapped!

"Lie flat on the stone beside me—now!" Gord said as he blew out the candle. A glow was visible ahead—the light of several approaching torches and lanterns. The girl complied with his order instantly. Men could be seen with the lights now, just entering the long passage.

"What are we to do?" Evaleigh wailed in a faint whispering voice.

"Take my hand, and crawl," Gord told her. "Use your elbows and knees. Keep your body down." Gord headed for the bewebbed wall of the corridor, trying to disturb as few of the ancient cobwebs and freshly spun silken networks as possible.

"It's no use! They'll find us," moaned the girl.

"Hush, and don't give up yet," he reassured her. "There is plenty of chance they'll overlook us in here." Then he looked ahead and saw guardsmen thrusting their flaming brands to either side of the corridor as the knot of soldiers progressed toward them. This slowed the pace of their pursuers, but the process made certain that no one would go unnoticed in the curving recesses of the arched underground tunnel. Shadows and webs—the only allies they had—would provide no obscurement for thief or damsel. It was time to come up with another strategy….

"Turn around, get as close to the wall as possible, and keep up with me," Gord hissed as he suited action to words. Left shoulder against the rough stones, he began crawling on his stomach back toward the iron door. He paused for a second, and Evaleigh ran into his feet. She had followed the soft sounds of his movement remarkably well and quickly.

"Ouch!" she said involuntarily at the contact, as much from surprise as from pain.

"Shhh… I wanted to make certain you knew where I was. Let's move again now," he said as he resumed his worming movement. Things scuttled across his hands as he crept, and he felt a spider crawling in his hair. From the stifled gasps and faint rustling noises coming from behind him, Gord knew that the girl was experiencing the same unwanted intrusions.

Suddenly, surprisingly, there was no stone against his shoulder. Gord almost entirely overlooked the opening in his desire to escape the oncoming men, then realized the message that his nerves were transmitting to his brain. He stopped abruptly after his upper body had passed the place, and again Evaleigh hit his feet with her head and uttered a soft sound as before.

"Back up about two feet—quickly!" Gord whispered sharply.

Gord could not make use of the light from the torches and lanterns of the men-at-arms searching the passageway, for they were—fortunately, all things considered—more than a hundred feet distant yet. So, he used his hands to explore the perimeter of the opening, and they told him it was a rectangle about a span high and perhaps a little more than half again as

wide. It seemed to slope slightly downward, as near as he could tell by reaching into it as far he could. It was low and narrow at the entrance here, but about a foot beyond it seemed to open into a rounded pipe—probably a drain for this place. He knew that his size and skills would enable him to negotiate the passage easily, and Lady Evaleigh was fortunately also slight and slender—although Gord suspected that her bosom and rounded posterior might pose some problem.

"What have you found?" asked Evaleigh, a hint of panic in her voice.

"This is our way out, my lady. It is a small hole, but it leads to a safe place. I'll crawl through first. You come as close upon my heels as possible, but be cautious of my kicking feet when I turn and enter. As soon as my legs are through the opening, follow me with all speed!"

Without waiting for a reply, Gord turned his body and wiggled his way through the opening. In just a couple of seconds, he was clear of the rectangular opening and into the somewhat more spacious pipe beyond. He crept ahead farther to make room for Evaleigh, whose breathing indicated she was laboring to get through the small access hole. Then, just as he was hoping it would not happen…

"I am stuck!" she cried. "Help me, Gord!"

Chapter 19

The searching guards could be no more than fifty feet from the place now. Within a very short time, light from a torch or a lantern would reveal the form of the would-be escapee, even though the webs above and around Evaleigh were very thick. Gord wished there was room for him to turn around, but he knew the cylinder was barely wide enough for forward progress.

"Try drawing up your legs and pushing with your boots!" Gord called over his shoulder to her as loudly as he dared. "Push your forearms tight against the walls to anchor them and hunch your body ahead wiggle-wise!" he added. Then he moved ahead a bit to see if there was any place that might afford him space to reverse himself and lend a hand.

A big bug of some sort plopped on the back of his neck just then, and Gord reacted with an involuntary sweep of his hand to remove the vermin before it bit him. His hand did its work, and he was surprised to notice that it did not make contact with any surface above his head. In a flash Gord rolled over, and with his back to the floor reached upward. There was a square, vertical shaft here, and it allowed him to rise cautiously erect. Once upright he turned, lowered himself until he was again on his stomach, and now found himself in a position to crawl back toward Evaleigh.

"Oh!" Evaleigh said, startled at first contact with his hand.

Before she could utter anything else, Gord grabbed her by the upper arms and yanked her toward him. He worked backward down the pipe a short distance, enough to straighten out his arms, and pulled her toward him again. She was well clear of the constricting entrance now, and able to move on her own, so Gord merely backed a bit further, stood up once again in the shaft he had discovered, and quickly climbed upward a couple of feet.

"Gord! Where are you?" Evaleigh whispered into the darkness.

"Pssst! Ahead! I'm in a shaft that goes up. When you hear me clearly, use your hand to find the opening above your head," he instructed the frightened girl. "I'll keep talking, and I'll climb up farther so you'll be able to stand in here, too…. Are you at the place yet?"

Gord heard her moving directly beneath him. "Yes, I'm going to stand up now," she said. "But I can't climb!"

"I'll help, so don't worry—we're as good as free now!" Actually, Gord had no idea where the shaft would lead, or if they would ever escape, but here was a chance. This was no time for doubts!

There was a good foothold just a couple of feet up into the shaft, and using this advantage, the young man braced himself and reached down between his feet to where he felt Evaleigh's hands grasping at his booted legs in a desperate attempt to move upward in the chimney. As the sounds of the search in the corridor outside grew even louder and closer, her small hand found his groping one, and the little fingers closed on it with surprising strength—the grip of terror. He hauled and she came upward, feet scrabbling noisily on the sides of the shaft as she did so.

"I hear something in there!" A shouted voice echoed through the pipe and up the shaft. "And look—there's been something crawling around this damned drain!"

So they had found the exitway quickly, thought Gord, but could they get through the opening as easily as he had? That was the key question now, for they needed time to get up this chimney and to wherever it led. The shouts and commands that followed indicated that armor was being stripped off for an attempt at entry. Some guard tossed his torch into the narrow passage, and it rolled nearly all the way to the opening in which Gord and Evaleigh were hiding. It was time to move upward as swiftly as possible, while the noise and confusion of the intended pursuit masked their ascent.

Holding Evaleigh in place with one arm, Gord groped upward with the other, seeking a crack in which he could lodge his fingers to pull himself up farther. Then his spirit leapt as his exploring digits closed around the cold metal of an iron rung! Grasping it firmly, he used his other arm and his feet to help his frightened companion upward at the same time. Fortunately, the hard soles of Evaleigh's boots made it possible for her feet to find purchase on the sides of the chimney, so Gord did not have to bear all of her weight in addition to his own. And after this bit of practice, she became fairly good at hoisting herself up.

The pair clambered up until Gord's waist was opposite the rung set into the stones of the wall and the top of Evaleigh's head was even with his shoulders. Thanks to the faint illumination afforded by the torch, Gord discovered another metal rung about two feet above the first one, in what seemed to be the start of a ladder arrangement that would enable them to ascend more easily.

The sounds from beneath them were louder now; someone was in the passage! But no sooner had fear begun to rise in his throat than Gord heard a deep voice cry out: "I'm stuck! Push!" Gord allowed himself a slight smile

as he grasped the second rung and boosted himself up another few inches. As he did this, his shoulder pushed against a projection on the wall opposite the rungs. The projection pivoted smoothly upward under the pressure he had accidentally applied. At the same time, a dull grinding sound came from beneath. In a moment the light from the torch below was shut off.

"What happened?" the girl inquired.

"I think my shoulder tripped something that closed the mouth of this shaft!" Gord answered excitedly. "This must be a secret means of escape placed here by some bygone lord—and long forgotten, no doubt, else the passage would have been shut tight and we would now be worming our way hopelessly toward some deep sink or cistern."

Gord felt the beautiful girl shudder at the thought of what fate could have been theirs. He helped her move up until her feet were braced against the lowest of the metal rungs. Then he felt his way a few feet farther upward, confirming to himself that the metal bars did indeed progress up the chimney, and that they were strong enough and anchored well enough to hold under his weight. The thoughtfulness of the builder in making them thick was appreciated by Gord, although he was sure that time and decay had weakened them sufficiently to bring breakage from hard or heavy usage. Neither he nor Evaleigh would be so careless as to unduly strain these metal rungs.

Positioned just above the girl, he pulled out the candle stub once again, sparked the tinder, and got the wick alight. Sure enough, more rungs led upward, reaching into the darkness beyond the area illuminated by the tiny candle flame.

"I'll ascend slowly, one rung at a time," he told Evaleigh. "You climb just behind me, being careful not to place all of your weight on any one rung, and holding firm so as not to slip or fall. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I can do it easily here. This is just like a ladder!" Evaleigh sounded slightly hysterical, but she climbed calmly enough. She also climbed quickly, so that Gord was forced to stop looking back to watch out for her and instead devote his attention to keeping a good pace ahead of her.

The shaft led them up no more than another thirty feet. Then it opened into a cylindrical cell about twenty feet in diameter, the vertical passage coming out about three feet from the base of the wall. The center of the cell's domed ceiling was about eight feet above Gord's head. There was nothing in the place except a tangled heap of old, filthy rags lying a short

distance from the shaft opening and an ancient lantern a few feet away to the other side. The latter still held the remains of a thick candle. This Gord set burning with the small taper he held, extinguishing it as the larger one came to life.

"How do we get out of this place?" asked Evaleigh uneasily as she gazed at the unbroken expanse of stone that formed the walls of the cell.

"No place such as this would exist," Gord told her in reply, "unless the builder had made some means of exit. Its purpose is secret escape, and therefore we must look for a hidden means of egress. Unless the entrance is secret too, the rest would not be, lady," Gord explained.

"Oh," said the girl, brushing dirty hand against smudged cheek. "But how do we find a secret means of leaving this tiny place? The air here is bad, I can hardly breathe, and the walls seem to enclose and suffocate me!"

"Help me look for marks on floor or wall, which could mean stone moving on stone," Gord said as he put down the lantern near the center of the chamber. "Don't worry—it won't take long, for I am skilled in this sort of thing, being a thief." Gord too noticed that the air within the room was stuffy and stale. It was damp and reeking as well, and he suspected that their breathing and the flaming candle helped to make it worse.

So, there was more than one reason for them to hurry. They might still be pursued from below, if there was a way to open the chimney from the other side. And certainly, they had to get out of this chamber before the bad air overcame them. Both of those facts seemed almost immaterial to Gord at the moment, however, for something else was creeping over him. Gord's spine crawled and an insufferable sense of foreboding seemed to weigh upon his whole being, almost as if the cell were indeed contracting, closing in to crush and entomb them both. What was wrong?

There was a faint stirring behind him. Gord spun, catlike, his hand going instantly to his dagger. There was a little puff of dust just above the pile of rags…. Had some air blown just then? Evaleigh was already busy inspecting their prison, working the area of the chamber farthest from the pile of rags, and she seemed oblivious to any incipient menace. Gord scolded himself silently, shrugged, and set about to join her in the search. His imagination was getting the better of his common sense—and that was no way to get out, he told himself. Still, no harm in keeping his dagger at the ready….

"I will work on the opposite side, over here," he said. "Take your time, lady. Better to be certain than miss the clue we must find."

Evaleigh, who was bent over scrupulously examining every inch of the floor and wall in her vicinity, only muttered a distracted agreement. Gord turned and went toward the curving stone across from her. He started to kick the bundle of mildewed cloth near the base of the wall, but somehow he was unable to bring his booted foot into contact with such unwholesome material. The heap actually had a manlike form, Gord noted as he gazed down at it—too long, too thin, but manlike nonetheless.

Then, even as he stared in horrible fascination, the rags silently twitched and twisted themselves into an even closer semblance of humanity, and from the heap an odor of mold and putrescent flesh wafted its way into Gord's nostrils. Gord took a step back with an involuntary gasp of fear and disgust. The stuff was trying to form itself! Whatever it was, it meant them no good, and they were trapped with it!

Fortunately, Evaleigh was engrossed in her search. She had not looked in Gord's direction for some time, and apparently the stench that rose from the rags was not potent enough to reach her attention.

"I think I feel something," she called, keeping her back to Gord as she spoke and running her hand along an area low on the wall she was examining.

"Good work, my lady!" Gord replied with a shudder as the rag-thing flopped wetly in its efforts to raise its upper half. "I'll join you in just a moment."

Now the man-shaped clump of rotting fiber was in a position similar to that of a person seated on the ground, armlike appendages propping its headless torso upright, the "legs" drawing toward the body so as to enable it to arise to a fully erect stance! And a thick, wormy thing was slowly arising from within that horrible torso—a thing of sickly gray with yellow, pulsing veins visible through its membranous skin.

If this worm-creature was the "head" of the rag "body," Gord knew what to do. Without hesitation, he stepped forward and swung the keen dagger in an arc. A moldy twist of rags flew upward, as an arm would to block a blow, but the razor-edged blade cut through the filthy cloth and struck the worm just below the bulbous upper protrusion that must have been its head.

Reeking matter splattered the nearby wall and ran down it in viscous, gray-yellow strands. The severed bulb fell noiselessly onto the rags and left

a foul stain on the fabric and stone it touched as it rolled a few feet and disappeared down the shaft. A sigh seemed to issue from the heap of rags, an almost-human sound. Then the whole pile collapsed back into formlessness, making a disgusting, squishy sound as it did so.

"Gord, what are you doing?" Evaleigh, on hands and knees, was looking sidewise in his direction, over her shoulder. "Stop poking around in those dirty old tatters and help me! I think I have our way out!"

Gord shook away his horror and disgust, surreptitiously wiped his blade on a bit of the rags, and slipped the dagger back into its sheath as he advanced across the cell. "What have you found?" he replied, pretending nothing had happened, as he picked up the lantern from the center of the chamber and moved closer.

"Here!" cried the girl. "The exit is right here! You were right, dear Gord, my rescuer! The place was easy to find."

Gord peered at the spot she was pointing to, holding the lantern close and willing his hand not to shake. The entire episode with the rag-thing had consumed only a few seconds of time, but the memory of it would last much longer.

After a few seconds of careful scrutiny, Gord managed to make out faint scratches on the edge of a block that protruded slightly from the wall. On his own it would have taken him hours to detect these marks, unless he was very lucky and caught the striations just so in a good light. Evaleigh had not had the benefit of such illumination. Gord looked at the girl with new respect. Perhaps the tales he had heard about elven eyesight were true, in which case thank gods for her heritage!

"Move back just a little please, dear lady, and I shall try to find the means by which it is opened," he said to her and moved to examine the wall with eye and fingers. "You are keen-eyed and clever indeed, lady!"

"Thank you, sir!" Evaleigh replied with a small curtsey and a note of cheerfulness in her voice for the first time since this escapade had begun.

They were by no means safe, thought Gord, but they were still at large and undiscovered. There was now real hope—so long as the rag-thing did not regain its unnatural life again. A small stone moved inward under his touch, and as it did so a small crack widened, revealing and freeing a wide, low panel of rock. By pressing on one end of it, Gord discovered that the panel pivoted around a center post. He pulled on the slab until it stuck into the chamber, perpendicular to the curved wall. The opening was not huge,

but easily big enough to enable them to pass into a narrow stone tunnel beyond it. Gord took time to reclose and lock the panel in its original place, feeling considerable relief as he did so. Neither the guards, nor anything else, would have an easy time following their route. Then the pair started to follow the passage that had been concealed behind the secret door, Evaleigh carrying the lantern and Gord with dagger in hand.

After a short distance the narrow corridor dead-ended at a broader one that led both left and right. Gord opted for the left, saying that they could try the other direction if this one failed to offer something positive soon. Before long they entered a larger place, pillared and arched, that was the nexus of many tunnels. In addition to the one they had entered from, there were four other passages leading off from the place, and a spiral flight of stone stairs leading upward as well. Gord disliked the sight of the steps, and after a moment of deliberation, he set off to the right, his female companion in tow.

"What is this place, Gord?" asked Evaleigh.

"Towns and cities are full of surprises like this," he began. "In addition to sewers, drains, cisterns, caverns, and catacombs, there is a warren of escape tunnels and secret adits—the highways of many who wish not to be seen."

"*All* cities?" Evaleigh asked incredulously.

"I can't speak for all of them, only a few. I've encountered this sort of passage before. It is part of a hidden means of communication and escape, from its look, and one that hasn't been neglected, either—so let's press on!"

Evaleigh had allowed her pace to flag, but at Gord's urging she picked it up again. They were nearing the end of the passage anyway. After another ten or fifteen steps, it ended at a narrow spiral stairway that had been crudely chiseled from the solid rock. There was a heap of old clothing in a nearby hamper—a sure sign that this passage was still used for something—and Gord stopped for a second to root around in it.

After selecting two somewhat dirty and malodorous cloaks, the young man told Evaleigh to take her own off and replace it with one of the others. She demurred, but Gord insisted, stating that although hers was now soiled and tattered, its workmanship and quality were still too easily noted. They compromised by locating a garment that fit over the cloak she wore, thus hiding it and adding a bit of seeming bulk to her slight figure.

Creeping up the steps with caution, Gord was ready for anything. All he came to was a manure pit.

"Whew!" he said involuntarily when he opened the tiny concealed door that led from the spiral staircase to the dung heap. "Now I know why these cloaks stunk so!"

Evaleigh held her nose and grimaced, but stepped ahead as rapidly as her companion did, crossing the heaps of manure and bits of rotting straw and heading for a wooden ladder at the far end of the pit. They moved up again, their ascent ending when Gord pushed open a trap door and emerged into a wooden shed containing wheelbarrows, spades and forks, and a small cart. The walls of the shed were old, weathered, and warped, so here and there holes and cracks could be seen. Gord reached over and shuttered the lantern quickly, keeping only a small slot to cast a little beam of light. By its ray they found the door, which opened at ground level into a stable area of some sort. Gord extinguished the lantern and discarded it, finding the moonlit sky to be sufficient for easy travel, and they left the shed behind. As they exited, Gord heard Evaleigh draw her first deep breath in some time.

After they had left the stable area and walked for a while, the area began to look familiar to Gord. He put off saying anything until he was sure, and then exclaimed happily, "We're in Ratswharf! I know this area well. Just up ahead is Tannery Street and beyond is the Umber Stream. We'll go to our right here and be at the docks in no time!"

Trying to sound as enthused as he was, Evaleigh responded, "Yes, I'm free at last! You *are* my champion, Gord!"

"Thank you, Evaleigh, but neither you nor I are quit of Boss Dhaelhy yet. His writ extends here and a long way around, too. But now we are about to start on the second stage of our escape…."

His voice trailed off as they came to the wharf where hides were unloaded. The odor here was unmistakable too, and actually worse than that of the dung they had recently had to tread across. As the girl made a face and held her nose, Gord pulled her closer to him. At the edge of the wharf, they walked so as to enable him to peer over the side toward the water below. After a bit he stopped, climbed nimbly down the piling of the pier, and used his foot to pull on a rope tied there. A small skiff attached to the other end appeared under him, and he dropped lightly into the boat.

"Quick, now, Evaleigh," Gord urged. "Sit on the edge of the pier and slide off and into the boat. I'll catch you so we don't capsize."

The girl shrugged and complied without further hesitation. After all she had been through this night, what was one little leap into a bobbing cockleshell? Although the skiff rocked violently when she landed, Gord was true to his word, both catching her neatly and maintaining the stability of the small craft. After helping her find a seat in the bow, he moved to the stern and picked up the sweep that was resting there. A few quick pushes and pulls, and Gord had sculled the boat out of sight of the wharf and into the current. His sculling and the flow of the Artonsamay soon carried them through the wide Ratspool, where various small ships and barges were moored, and on down the river.

Keeping well to the left of midstream, Gord passed the lowering blackness of Stoink's walls and towers without incident. He used the oar mainly to steer now; the current was swift in this area. After an hour, there was still no sign of pursuit, and the walled town was far to the north, for the river bent sharply south after passing the place.

"Someone might eventually put a missing boat together with your escape, lady, but not for some time, I think. Our only real worry now would be magical assistance in hounding us down—I know little of dweomercraft, and less of how to combat it."

"For once I come to the rescue, Gord," Evaleigh said with a musical laugh. "Of magic and enspellment I know a little, for my dear grandmother —great-great-grandmother, really—taught me some of that art, though nothing potent or useful here. That kind woman did bestow upon me something that will serve us now, I think. Wait, I'll show you."

Gord watched the girl shed her cloaks. The golden light of the newly risen sun revealed that she wore tunic and hose of dove gray. "You are dressed as a boy, lady, but no such youth ever displayed such a figure in those garments!" he said.

Evaleigh smiled her pleasure at the compliment but kept up her work, tugging here and there at the leather strip girding her narrow waist. From it she drew a flat, milky crystal. "Look at this!" she said proudly, handing it to him.

The evident pride and assurance the small stone gave her made Gord examine it closely. He noted that the crystal was carved so as to resemble a bird with wings folded down as if to shelter something before it. The thing was bound with silver wire, and a silver chain was fastened to it for wearing around the neck. He handed it back to the girl.

"It is a well-crafted bit of jewelry, lady, but looks to be of no great value, I fear. Why, it would fetch no more than a few—"

"This is no trinket!" Evaleigh interrupted with more laughter. "It is an amulet of power, little fonkin—a protection against any seeking me by means of spell or dweomer."

"I see, lady," Gord responded respectfully. Then, with a bit of an edge in his voice, he added, "What is this 'fonkin' you call me?"

Evaleigh explained with a giggle that it was an elvish term for someone silly or ignorant. "Be not offended, Gord, for I employed it only as an endearment," she said sweetly.

Now it was Gord's turn to be flattered by her words, and he smiled at her. She returned the smile, meanwhile fastening the chain so the amulet was secured around her neck. The process interested Gord, for the tunic was thin, and when it was drawn tight by her movements, some most interesting details of her anatomy were revealed. Evaleigh seemed not to mind the scrutiny a whit, but Gord was careful not to overdo it.

"Make a pallet of the cloaks in the bottom of this skiff, Evaleigh, and sleep a bit," he said. "I'll steer us carefully so as to avoid contact with any other craft." The girl started to object, but Gord was firm, and Evaleigh did admit she was very tired indeed. "With you out of sight," he added, "anyone passing or observing us from the bank will think I am a fisher, alone and of no interest. It is safest this way."

Evaleigh remained asleep through the morning and well into the afternoon. When he was sure no other craft were in sight, Gord allowed himself to doze now and again, but he always remained in a sitting position so that he would not sleep long. Serenity, not fatigue, was making him drowsy; he was young and long accustomed to remaining awake for many hours at a stretch when he had to. As the afternoon shadows lengthened, his companion began to stir and make little moaning sounds. Whether they arose from discomfort from the hard bed or from a dream, Gord knew she would soon wake and would be thirsty and hungry, as he was.

There was a small tributary of the Artonsamay at hand, and he sculled the boat into its waters, working hard to pass through the strong flow where the two streams met. When the girl did awaken a half-hour or so later, he had managed to work their skiff well up the creek to a sheltered bank where willows hung down and hid the boat. As the prow bumped against the shore, Evaleigh sat up and looked around, asking where they were. Gord

helped her out of the skiff, and soon both were seated on the soft grass beneath a huge, old weeping willow. They were famished, and the dry and tasteless rations that Gord brought forth from a wallet was not much, but it helped to quell the pangs of hunger when washed down with the clear water from the stream at their feet. Gord closed his eyes for a minute, enjoying the comfortable feelings of a full belly and the yielding grass beneath his tired body. A minute became a few minutes, and…

"Wake up!" Evaleigh was shaking him gently but urgently.

Gord's eyes flew open. It was fully dark—nearly lightless here beneath the willow. He had been asleep for hours!

"Listen, Gord, someone is coming!" Evaleigh's tone was filled with fright.

"Yes, I hear," he told the girl, taking her arm and squeezing it in reassurance. "We should be safe enough here, if we are quiet."

Voices and the clopping sound of horses moving slowly came clearly to them on the night breeze. Peering out from the shelter of the drooping branches, Gord saw several riders outlined against the sky. They were heading for the general area of the copse of willows, but not directly at the place where he and Evaleigh were concealed. Soon Gord could count their number and hear what the riders were saying.

"Over there, Weasel, see the dead one?"

"Shit, I ain't blind, Mossback, I'm going for it!"

"Shut up, you two," a fellow at the end of the file of eight horsemen said sharply. "You'll wake up some wight!"

"Ah, blow it out your ass, Barl! Nobody or nothing in this godforsaken place to hear," Weasel retorted.

They rode past, bickering and bantering. About fifty yards farther on, the men dismounted. Although it was a dark night, Gord could discern the goal they had sought—a large, dead tree on a small knoll. Whatever business they had there was concluded in an hour or so, and they again passed, heading back the way they had come, but traveling silently now.

Gord and Evaleigh stayed put until morning. Then he arose and instructed her to remain hidden. In the early light, it was an easy matter for him to follow the trail the men had left and see where they had stopped. It appeared to be a camp, with an old, dead fire. Gord knew no such fire had existed the night before, and it immediately occurred to him that the ashes of a "fire" would be a good place to hide something. Some further

examination discovered little else in the area, so he decided to play his hunch.

After a few moments of digging with dagger and knife, one of Gord's blades struck metal. More digging brought forth a cache of silver and electrum—far more than was practical for himself and Evaleigh to carry. Gord scooped out several dozen of each type of coin, replaced ashes on top of the remainder, and made the whole look as undisturbed as possible.

This find was truly a boon, in more ways than one. Of the hundred gold orbs that had been Gord's share of the loot he and Gellor had gained in Holdroon, some had been spent on information and forged documents, and the bulk had been left behind. When he rescued Evaleigh, Gord had with him but ten of the gold coins. Now he could keep the orbs as security, with plenty of other metal to spend first. The spending of gold attracted attention, and he and the girl must do their utmost to remain unnoticed.

Gord returned to Evaleigh and told her briefly of what he had found while helping her back into her hiding place in the bottom of the boat. Evaleigh accepted the unexpected wealth without comment. Noblewomen thought little of such things, Gord supposed. They took the skiff up the tributary stream for a few more miles, until Gord felt it was safe for them to begin traveling overland. They left the boat moored in a secluded cove on the shore of the stream and followed a rutted dirt track leading due east. Eventually they came to a hamlet where they hitched a ride on a farm cart heading for market in a nearby village. This proved to be a place where they could find horses, so Gord and Evaleigh were soon mounted, well supplied, and traveling on their own again.

After a week of hard travel, they finally arrived in Mid-meadow, exhausted and dirty, but otherwise happy and in excellent spirits. Gord thought he had never been happier, despite the deprivation they had been through, and Evaleigh was radiant. Although they were still in some danger, it was slight, so after discussion, they decided to find the best inn, rest and restore themselves, and buy new clothes before setting out again for Evaleigh's homeland in the Blemu Hills.

Locating a good inn was a simple matter, and new linens and garments were also easy to come by. Soon, the pair were settled in small, clean, and comfortable rooms, luxuriating in great tubs of steaming water provided at considerable cost but deemed by both well worth the coppers. Evaleigh, looking refreshed and even more radiant now that she was again properly

attired, joined Gord in his chamber where they were served a hot supper and cool wine. Replete, they both sat back, sipped their wine, and smiled at each other.

"Gord, at last I feel truly free," Evaleigh sighed. "Free of that bandit pig who calls himself a noble sovereign, free of his confinement, free of threat of slavery. And I owe it all to you!"

Evaleigh's violet eyes were warm. Her long hair, the color of spun platinum, was free, flowing across her shoulders and down her back. The gown she wore this night was new, a simple one of silk and snowy hue, embroidered at neckline, cuffs, and hem with flowery design. She had caught the waist with a satin sash the color of her eyes. It seemed to Gord that no living woman could be this lovely, this unaffected. Her every line and curve he had memorized, and tonight, clad as she was, the memories came rushing back, unbidden but not unwelcomed—a glimpse of bare back and arm as she splashed cold stream water in the morning, a leg revealed in walking or riding… all wonderful memories indeed.

"My part is small, lady, and for it you owe nothing," Gord told her sincerely, eyes locked on hers. "What true man could have done otherwise?"

"Don't be a fonkin again, Gord. Many men helped to put me in that pig's toils, others imprisoned me, while still other men sought to use me by trickery, flattery, or sheer purchase. You did risk all for me, Gord, and I owe you my very life."

He took her delicate hand in his, saying, "If you insist, I shall accept credit… but only for a duty begun, not completed. We have come fifty leagues, but there are five times that number betwixt you and Knurl—and who can say how many dangers yet to overcome?"

"You are my saviour, nonetheless, Gord. I happily place my safety and welfare in your hands"—as she spoke, the girl arose from her chair, prompting Gord to do likewise—"just as I place my person in your arms now!"

She moved to him, and there was no resisting such an offer. Gord eagerly clasped his arms around her little waist as his lips sought hers. They were indeed as soft and wonderful as their looks had promised, and their kiss lasted and grew more passionate as the two allowed its sensations to fill their beings. Gord's hands moved of their own volition, going here and there to explore and affirm the girl and the fact that he held her thus.

Evaleigh made no protest, only kissing him more passionately than before and allowing her own small hands to discover what they could of Gord. Although neither directed it, both were soon disrobed and prone upon the yielding down of the bed's expanse. Kisses gave way to nibbles, soft bites, and rapid breathing.

"Evaleigh—oh, Evaleigh!—I give you my soul!"

"You have mine already, Gord—my champion! Tell me that you love me…."

Chapter 20

The short rest in Midmeadow turned into a week's hiatus. Both of the lovers were loath to depart the town, for it meant the end of their idyll. They talked little of the journey ahead, nothing of the problem of facing Count Blemu with a thief's plea for his daughter's hand. Somehow it would work out. There was time for worrying about that later, but now was for them to enjoy.

When Gord found that nearly all of the nobles and luckies he had taken from the cached treasure of the incautious bandits were depleted, he knew their time in the town was up, and that he and Evaleigh must press on. He couldn't ply his profession here without risk to the girl, and the reserve of gold was needed for possible emergencies along the way. Gord didn't know what to expect when he informed Evaleigh of their need to resume their journey, but he found himself surprised somewhat when she readily agreed. He must have showed some hurt at her ready consent, for she gave him love and told him tenderly that it was longing for her home and family, not a wish to destroy their new-found life together, which made her anxious to go on. That was the end of the discussion, and the next day they were on their way.

Gord found a caravan of merchants and associated folk heading south for Womtham, a town in distant Nyrond. Such a train would travel slowly, but its mercenary guards would help assure safe arrival. He and Evaleigh posed as newly married gentlefolk traveling to see relatives. A sennight or so after embarking, they reached the carved stones marking the northernmost claim of King Archbold, third of that name to reign as sovereign over all Nyrond. Claims aside, the place was borderland at best, and both Gord and Evaleigh were glad for the security of mail-clad horsemen and foot soldiers, as well as that provided by the strange man in the odd cap, who was certainly a priest of some sort, or a magic-user. Despite the seeming protection afforded by the fellow's presence, Gord avoided him and made sure never to look at his eyes.

The composition of the caravan changed from time to time at various stops along the way. As the train reached deeper into Nyrond, it shrank a bit, but its progress continued apace. The travelers had angled a bit eastward at Theekham and were now going directly toward the rising sun. When he inquired as to the reason for this, Gord was informed by one of the merchants that they were aimed now at the Flinty Hills, where the

headwaters of the Duntide River were shallow and easy to cross. Thereafter, the caravan would be but two days' travel from Womtham.

It proved to be exactly as the trader had said—although he had neglected to predict that in the final leg of their journey, they would have encounters with some savage creatures, and a skirmish with a band of humanoids bent on rapine. The latter incident would have been a serious affair had not the arch-mage (as Gord learned afterward was his status) used his arcane arts to cause a series of fiery blasts to erupt in the midst of the gnoll horde. This resulted in the incineration of their chief and his principal assistants, as well as roasting sundry others of the vicious humanoids, and the survivors turned and fled in rout. Of the contacts with monsters, one had been nothing more than a hungry wyvern, brought down from the sky by a shower of quarrels and arrows, while the other was with a small band of hill giants who never came close to the caravan after seeing its size and soldiery.

Womtham was a bustling trade center, and both Gord and Evaleigh enjoyed the three days they spent there after taking their leave of the disbanding caravan. A rest from their traveling refreshed them both, and Gord in particular found the place interesting both in form and in populace. Womtham was a typical old Oeridian town, with its architecture and construction showing a great deal of dwarven and gnomish influence. There were, in fact, fair numbers of these sorts of folk, as well as many halflings, going about their business in the town. Evaleigh had seen the place before, but Gord was quite unused to such surroundings, and he greatly enjoyed sightseeing and mingling with the residents.

During their travels about the town, Gord and Evaleigh made the acquaintance of a group of traders and pilgrims who were bound for the town of Innspa to the southeast. Having discovered nothing better, and being anxious to get on their way again, the two set out with this assemblage. About halfway along the route toward Innspa, Gord and Evaleigh took their leave early one morning and headed for Finton Village, angling northeast away from the track of the caravan.

A rutted road led in the general direction they desired, and the two had been told that Finton was no more than half a day's ride. Although it proved to be somewhat more, they came to the pretty little cluster of buildings before darkness fell, and spent a comfortable night at a small inn there. The patrols of Nyrondel cavalry were more frequent here along the eastern

border of the realm than along the western frontier, and such places as Finton were quite secure and peaceful.

A few days more of riding along a rough easterly road brought them to a far wilder area, the worn-down portion of the southern Rakers known as the Flinty Hills. There was no possibility of avoiding the foothills without going far out of their way and through even worse terrain than the Flinty Hills. A path to the north, if such were feasible or necessary, would force them to try to negotiate the jagged peaks of the Raker Mountains, which were set like a wall between the western lands of the Oeridians and the Flannae and the barbarian realms to north and east. A southerly route would require them to pass either through or all the way around the huge Adri Forest; they had neither the strength of arms to do the former, nor the time to do the latter.

The road, such as it was, bent sharply southward and ran along the edge of the steep uplands, quite the opposite of what Gord had hoped for. If it eventually led to Innspa, following it would take them not less than one hundred leagues out of their way, and a good portion of their subsequent journey would then have to be through the treacherous Adri. To establish where the road would take them, they rode to the top of a great tor nearby, and from its summit surveyed the course of the artery. The road, much to Gord's dismay, kept southward. From this vantage point, however, Evaleigh spied a path that twisted and turned in a generally northeastward direction, disappearing quickly enough, of course, amidst the rolling terrain. It was obviously no mere game trail, so they chose to take it.

The going was slow, even following the trail, for the rough ground and steep ascents and descents made any pace above a walk very dangerous for their horses. In many places, both riders were forced to dismount and lead their animals. Gord wished that he had had sufficient foresight to bring mules along. The trail did at least show evidence of human use, and from the signs of sheep and goats, there was hope that small communities would be encountered along the way. While they had food and water with them, Gord did not desire to spend nights camped in the open in such a wild area. A more immediate problem soon arose, however: the path they were following split into two forks, one leading nearly straight east, the other in a more northerly direction. Both showed signs of use.

"Evaleigh, have you any sense as to which we should take?" Gord asked his companion. "I am unable to detect any difference in the twain."

"Left or right, it makes no difference as far as I can see," she replied after pondering both paths for a minute. "Neither seems to direct us straight toward our goal, so I must ask you to choose."

Eventually Gord opted to follow the northern branch, for it looked somewhat less rough and it showed evidence of more recent usage. They followed it for several hours, and then it divided into three. Gord followed the center trail, for it curved east. This track led them into the very heart of the Flinty Hills, where the steep-sided mounds were highest. The afternoon shadows were lengthening by now, and Gord began to feel concerned about where they would find safety for themselves during the dark hours to come.

All too soon twilight was upon them, and still no sign of habitation was to be seen. A ravine ahead offered the most promise, so the pair rode in that direction, following a narrow path between two steep mounds. Suddenly, a small boulder came rolling and bounding down the rocky wall to their right, throwing off splinters of stone as it fell and then coming to rest with a crash just ahead of them. Both horses spooked at this, and Gord and Evaleigh had all they could manage to control their mounts as the animals bucked and did their best in the somewhat cramped quarters to turn and gallop in the opposite direction. By the time they succeeded in bringing the frightened creatures under control, the trap had been sprung.

"Surrender or die!" The booming voice came from behind them. Gord pulled his shortsword out in one swift motion as he wheeled his gelding around to face the challenger. His gaze fell upon not one, but a dozen men standing some fifty or sixty feet away. They were variously clad in studded jacks, sarks of iron rings, and leather coats and skins. Most bore long spears and short-hafted axes. One large fellow who stood slightly ahead of the others leaned on a huge, double-bitted battle-axe. This one again bellowed in a stentorian voice.

"Cast down that toothpick, fool! Look to your flanks and rear!"

Without dropping his blade, Gord quickly glanced left and right. On the rim of the cut they were in stood another dozen or so men, similar to those he had first seen but holding crossbows, rocks, javelins, and the like. A rapid look over his shoulder revealed yet more of the hillmen—spearmen and slingers this time, the latter with slings whirling slowly.

"Why ambush two wayfarers?" Gord called to the head man. "We are peaceful and threaten you not!"

"True, you pose us no threat," said the tall leader as he strode toward the trapped couple. "It is we who are the danger, and if you do not now surrender, you will be dead shortly." The men behind him followed closely on his heels as he continued to advance.

Seeing no other course, Gord tossed his sword to the ground and dismounted. He voiced a brief instruction to the terrified Evaleigh to stay where she was. Nearly frozen with fear, she managed to nod her head in compliance. Then, rather than waiting for the hillman to come to him, the young thief walked boldly toward his would-be captor, allowing a bit of swagger to be apparent. As the two closed the distance between them, Gord was surprised to discern that the hillman was fully head and shoulders taller than he was. The leader must have been nearly seven feet tall, and the warriors behind him all easily topped six feet. Gord kept walking, intending to meet his adversary before he and his fellows could get too close to Evaleigh. The hillman cooperated by halting his advance, and Gord strolled up to within a couple of paces of where the leader stood, leaning on his great axe. Determined not to allow his fear to show, Gord spoke just as he came to a halt.

"Well, you're big enough…. But I had always heard that you hill folk were courageous, not cowards."

The great fellow stood up straight, grasped the handle of his axe firmly, and glared hard at the smaller man before him. The others behind muttered threats and shot back insults in response to Gord's disparaging of their bravery. Booming forth a laugh, the hillman chief retorted, "It is no craven act to surround eggs with straw so that they remain unbroken until you're ready to eat them!"

"And dogs hunt in packs because they desire company," Gord answered smoothly, never taking his mocking gaze from the man.

"Dogs? You call us dogs?" the huge hillman roared, flashing his battle-axe into motion and preparing to cleave the small man in two for the insult just voiced.

Gord did not flinch. "You are truly a lion to thus bravely slay so fierce an adversary—even unarmed as I am!" This Gord said as loudly and sarcastically as he could, expecting the great curved weapon to slice downward any moment.

The others behind the leader whooped and guffawed at this remark, for Gord indeed appeared to be more like a sheep than a deadly foeman. One of

their number called out mockingly, "Don't dirty your axe, Rendol! I'll slay the magpie with a blow from my palm!"

"Have your woman nearby to assist you in your recovery, in case I am tougher than the little children you usually bully," Gord answered in a scathing tone. "Better let the toughest amongst you handle the likes of me!"

Rendol had stood poised with axe held aloft during this brief exchange. He suddenly realized how stupid this posture was, and brought the weapon down to rest again. He made a successful effort to control his ire, and now looked at the slight man he was facing with slight respect rather than the disdain he had shown originally.

"Your mouth is as big as any dragon's, and your tongue faster than a scorpion's sting," began the leader. "I say you are a braggart and a liar, little man. I give you leave to pick up your sword, and then we will fight. When I've cut you into pieces small enough to satisfy me, I'll satisfy my other needs upon your woman there, and then honor will be restored."

The hillmen had been gathering closer as their chief spoke, and his last statement brought a cheer from them. Here was sport they could all enjoy.

"And if I should triumph?" Gord retorted.

This question nearly collapsed the hillmen with laughter, but one bellow from Rendol and they fell into silence, broken by a smattering of stifled haw-haws and sotto-voiced jests.

Rendol sneered at Gord and said, "Then one of my brothers here will fight you and avenge my death—"

"How many cats it takes to kill a mouse," Gord interrupted, shaking his head in mock wonderment. "But then, I suppose one mouse such as I would be worth ten cats such as you."

This brought a new round of scowls and grumbles from the hillmen. Shouts of "Kill 'im now, and let's get to the fun part!" and "Don't waste time!" were intermixed with vulgar comments and general jeering. The hulking leader again shouted his men to silence and kept up the dialogue with Gord.

"I am the cat then, and if the mouse escapes my claw"—here Rendol hefted the axe for emphasis—"then he and his mouse-main shall pass freely amongst the other toms as they will!"

At that, the hillmen shouted their dissent, but the chief glared them down. "I, Rendol, have spoken, and my word is *law*! Would any of you dispute

that? If so, I shall settle that matter before this little one is a hacked and bloody corpse."

None took up the proffered contest. Gord smiled grimly to himself as he turned and walked back to where his small blade lay. At least he had gained them their liberty as their prize; now all that was necessary was for him to be victorious in mortal combat with a giant hillman armed with a battle-axe as large as Gord himself!

As he came near to Evaleigh, Gord murmured under his breath for her to remain mounted and be prepared to ride for her life—scant hope there! He then picked up his shortsword, gazed for a moment at Evaleigh's pale face, and turned to face Rendol. He was ready.

The hillman was already moving toward Gord, this time not waiting for the smaller man to come to him. Gord only had time to get a couple of paces farther away from Evaleigh and their horses; then Rendol was upon him. The hillman's axe swept before him in a great arc, and Gord would have been cloven in twain at the waist had he not leapt nimbly aside. He continued moving sideways, circling around Rendol, so as to place himself in the position the huge foeman had held moments before and get clear of the area where Evaleigh and the horses stood. If an ill-aimed blow struck some onlooker, he cared not, but he meant to spare the girl and the animals such hazard. Gord backed slowly now, crouching a little, with his sword held low and ready for stroke or parry.

Rendol spun around quickly for a man of his size, using the momentum of his missed blow to assist the motion. Still whirling the twin-bladed weapon, the chief eyed Gord's position and tactic. He stepped forward without hesitation, now bringing the battle-axe up and down in a chopping stroke that Gord would find impossible to block with his small sword. Instead of trying to either dodge once again or parry hopelessly, Gord crouched lower and leaped straight at the larger man just as the axe was being brought back up for another chop. As he lunged, Gord lashed out with the sword in his right hand, looping the short blade in a cut aimed at the axeman's knees.

Rendol heaved mightily to cut short the upward arc of his axe and bring the weapon back down. At the same time he tried to move his legs backward out of harm's way. As the result of this combination of movements, the hillman overbalanced and fell forward. Gord's sword bit into Rendol's leather leggings, an instant before he threw his body to the

side to avoid the hillman's toppling body. The blade drew blood, but the attack did little damage other than to score first wound. In a match where only death meant victory, this made no difference. Gord gave no thought to self-congratulation, but instead somersaulted himself away so as to be well clear of any possible counterattack. He turned and bounced to his feet in time to see Rendol springing upright, battle-axe still clutched in both hairy hands and murder in his eyes.

"I am no joint of beef to be cleaved, oaf!" called Gord in his most mocking tone. "Where are your boasts now, windbag?" Here was a small advantage Gord thought might be built upon. An opponent blind with fury was an easier foe to vanquish—and Gord needed any advantage he could muster.

"I'll show you boasting—with my steel!" the hillman replied between clenched teeth, and then he moved forward with a blurring windmill of axe-work, the double-headed weapon whining from the force of its passage back and forth through the air. Gord had to skip and dance to keep clear of the whirling death-blade advancing upon him.

Rendol was still calm enough to demonstrate real skill at arms, and Gord knew he must push the man with more than words. The young thief put his Rhennee-learned acrobatics into play, doing a quick back-flip. As his feet rose over his head, and his knees approached his chin, Gord drew his small knife from his boot. As he landed, he reversed his grip so that his left hand palmed the weapon with handle downmost.

The grim axe-wielder, not noticing that his foe now held a second weapon, saw no threat in Gord's demonstration of gymnastic ability. In fact, he read it as a desperate maneuver to avoid the press he was employing to sunder his opponent's defense—and then the opponent. The figure-eight of the battle-axe's pattern flattened so as to become more offensive and less protective to he who wove it. At that moment, Gord let fly the knife—aiming not at the hillman's vital portions, most of which were shielded by blade or mail anyway, but at an exposed portion of forearm, left free of armor by extension in the attack.

"You foul little bastard!" Rendol roared in anger and surprise as the keen blade sank into his arm.

"Bastard yourself, you bloated windbag!" Gord spat out in reply. "That great axe you use is twice the size of this blade, yet you offered no equalizer—so I merely provided my own."

The huge hillman made no reply to this, other than to jerk the knife from his arm and hurl it back at Gord.

This hasty tactic gave Gord yet another opportunity. In his desire to use Gord's own weapon to harm its hurler, Rendol had taken his right hand from the haft of his battle-axe. Although the injured left member still held the weapon firm, it now lacked the strength to use it offensively.

As the hillman threw the knife at his adversary, his wounded arm allowed the head of the axe to drop. Gord darted forward, drawing his dagger from his belt and simultaneously bringing his sword up to knock away the oncoming knife. Then he brought the sword back across his body, in a backhand slash aimed at Rendol's face. As the hillman instinctively brought his axe up one-handed to ward off the slash, Gord struck out with the dagger he now held in his left hand. The edge of the smaller weapon easily cut through the thick leather bracer shielding Rendol's left wrist. Again Gord drew blood, and this wound was serious enough to cause the hillman to drop the axe in the bargain.

Rendol had to back away in great haste, his bleeding arm clutched close to his body, to avoid a flurry of thrusts and cuts from Gord. Now the hillman had only his own dagger for a weapon. He drew the blade with his good arm and used it in a vain attempt to defend himself against Gord's whirling weapons while he tried to circle around to where he could regain his fallen axe.

He tried, Gord gave him that. This big fighter was brave enough, and determined to win. No matter how he moved, however, Gord's sword was there, keeping him away from the axe. The combat became a terrible game, and soon the hillman was dripping blood from a half-dozen new wounds delivered by Gord's sword and dagger. Gord's black garments had several gashes, but his body had only been scratched or nicked two or three times.

The spectators to this grim match had grown ominously quiet now. Gord knew that soon one or more of them would forget about ceremony and come to Rendol's aid. Then all hell would break loose, and the hillmen would certainly hack him to bits. Time was just about up.

A sudden stab by Rendol gave Gord the opportunity he sought. He purposely over-reacted, leaping backward, seeming to stumble a little, and moving away from the battle-axe at last. Rendol quickly stepped forward and bent over, fingers clawing for his fallen weapon as he took his eyes off his opponent for a split second. When they looked up again, they saw only

death. Gord's sword and dagger struck home, the first hitting his neck and the other piercing the steel mesh protecting his body. The hillman's huge frame toppled over, coming to rest upon the axe he had so desperately sought, and the combat was over.

"Mouse has bitten cat," Gord said, looking from face to face around him, choosing words that he hoped would drive home his point without inciting the other hillmen to attack. "The cat is dead and the mouse goes freely with his mouse-main, as this doughty man promised."

No one moved to stop him as Gord cleaned and sheathed his blades—sword, dagger, and knife. He did not seek to despoil the fallen man, but simply turned his back on Rendol's corpse and walked slowly to where Evaleigh waited atop her palfrey, holding his own steed's reins. Her expression showed nothing. She was clever, Gord thought, keeping his own face a mask also. It was still touch-and-go as to whether or not these men would actually honor the promise of their slain leader. One false move or wrong word could set them off.

Gord swung up into the saddle and kneed his mount into a slow walk, heading in the direction he and Evaleigh had been going before the hillmen had surrounded them. There was no attempt to stop him, but he could hear mutterings beginning to grow in volume behind them. Gord slowed his mount and turned his body, allowing his companion to move ahead of him, and called back.

"If I come this way again," he said, "I'll bring a hundred-mark or so dogs with me to guarantee safe passage!"

"You will need more than that to escape us again!" a voice called back. There was some laughter at that.

"Scurry, mouse!" another hillman shouted defiantly. "Else we might forget a dead man's word!"

At that, Gord kicked his horse into a trot and slapped the girl's mount as he drew parallel with it. Together they cantered around the boulder ahead of them, out of the narrow passage and onto a better path beyond, as the last rays of the sun painted the sky with a sanguine hue.

"You seem unaffected by what just occurred," Evaleigh said in a small, distant voice.

"What is there to be troubled about, my dear one?" Gord replied casually. "After all, I defeated that fool, took his comrades' jibes and insults, and we rode free! That is fitting… the way of things in such places as this."

"I see," the girl said softly, and then spoke no more.

Gord insisted that they keep going well into the night, for he suspected some of the hillmen would attempt to find them during darkness and gain revenge. He walked ahead, leading both mounts, as Evaleigh dozed in her high-backed saddle.

After they had traveled in this fashion for a couple of miles, the narrow track met another, which grew into a road. Gord was confident that this route must lead to somewhere they could stay, and he wanted to make good time. He woke the sleepy girl and jumped back aboard his mount. The tired horses were brought into a trot by much urging, and within an hour the pair rode into a tiny cluster of huts—a place they later learned was called Owlsthorpe.

Dogs barked frantically as they entered the place, and several lights were visible behind shuttered windows. Someone shouted out, demanding to know who trespassed in the community, and Gord replied simply that friendly and tired travelers sought refuge from the night. The only reply was a slamming noise, indicating that the inquirer had shut and probably barred fast the shutter he had opened to ask. All around them, the lights inside the huts were doused.

"At least we aren't being attacked this time," Evaleigh observed ruefully.

Gord shrugged to himself in the dark and moved his gelding ahead, peering at the dark shapes around them. Evaleigh followed, and they advanced to the far edge of the hamlet without further incident. Here they came upon a small farmhouse and barn that were somewhat isolated from the other buildings. Gord dismounted in front of the barn door and used his dagger blade to carve through the simple lock holding it closed. Gord and Evaleigh led their horses inside, Gord barred the door with his sword blade, and soon both weary wayfarers were asleep in the straw therein.

A pounding on the secured door awakened them a few hours later, in the early morning. An outraged owner demanded to know who was in his barn. Gord and Evaleigh roused themselves, brushed off a few bits of clinging straw, and greeted the fellow cordially. After a few bronze zees clinked into his hand, the man was civil, although by no means friendly or informative —that required a few more coins. Eventually they learned where they were, how far away the next community was, and how to get there.

After paying yet more for a meal, the two left Owlsthorpe and rode east through the remainder of the Flinty Hills toward Knurl and Count Blemu's

castle there. They saw a few gnomes, fleetingly, and met no threat during their passage through the region. The land became a series of green, rolling hills then, and travel was swifter.

In two days they came to the ferry across the upper reaches of the Harp River. They crossed the river just as the sun was setting, and Evaleigh told Gord that they were now only half a day's ride from her home. That night they spent in a hostel near the crossing, making love desperately. Gord wasn't certain why, but for some reason a deep melancholy had settled over Evaleigh during the last two or three days. She had refused to elaborate on her mood on the few occasions when Gord chanced to bring it up, sometimes passing it off as a fleeting thing and at other times simply ignoring, or pretending not to hear, his questions.

Gord felt himself beginning to be overcome by the same bleak mood, which was frustrating because he did not know its cause and because he had expected both of them to be happy now that they were so close to their goal. Their intimate contact in the hostel on the eve of Evaleigh's homecoming heightened rather than lessened the mood, and he slept little that night, his brief periods of slumber troubled by evil dreams.

The next morning was bright and clear, and—much to Gord's surprise and pleasure—Evaleigh seemed to have thrown off her sadness. Smiling and radiant, she urged him to hurry, and the two raced their mounts along the well-kept highway. At a crossroads hamlet, Faselfarm, they spurred left, Evaleigh laughing as stray fowl squawked and flapped as they got out of the path of the thundering horses, and dogs pursued them, barking. Soon Gord saw the towers and battlements marking Castle Blemu. They too were seen, and amidst a sounding of brazen horns, mailed riders came forth to meet them. Evaleigh shouted her name joyously, and the challenging patrol quickly became a guard of honor for the long-lost Lady Evaleigh's triumphant return.

Chapter 21

A light shone in the distance, growing brighter as it came nearer. Then a loud rasping split the still, dark air, followed by the groaning creak of rusty metal grating on rusty metal. Torchlight flooded into the cell through the partially opened door and seemed, to the prisoner within its radiance, as bright as noonday sun. Gord shuffled forward to the full extent of the chain binding his left leg to the hasp set in the granite wall farthest from the door, shielding his eyes from the brightness, but eager to get the scant rations promised by this event.

Each day was the same for him, consisting of darkness infested by rodents, insects, and arachnids, broken only by this event—the doling out of a pannikin of water and a bit of food dished into his wooden bowl. This time he received a soupy mixture of vegetable peels and some unidentified stuff. Gord didn't worry about the ingredients at all, accepting the stuff and swallowing it down quickly. A small piece of hard, black bread was included in his ration, but this he intended to save for later.

The heavy door was slammed shut and the bolt once again shot home with the familiar rasping bang. The torchlight receded, and soon Gord was in total blackness again. He picked up the piece of bread for safekeeping, sat back and, as per his routine, allowed his system to begin digesting the food he had eaten. Soon he would begin his silent exercises, and then came the game of bread and rats. Sometimes the rats won, and carried off their feast, but usually an incautious rodent provided Gord with the protein he needed to stay alive and reasonably healthy in this dungeon.

How he had come to be in this place was something Gord could scarcely believe and understand, no matter how many times he turned it over in his mind….

When they had arrived in the outer bailey of Blemu Castle, Evaleigh had been whisked off by the seneschal, with a covey of twittering ladies-in-waiting and maids fluttering after. Gord was taken to a small waiting room of some sort, while grooms led their sweating horses to the stableyard for care and stalling. A servant brought him a flagon of wine and some tidbits for his refreshment during his wait, and Gord settled back and thought about the speech he would give before Count Blemu when the time came for his audience.

After a dozen such mental rehearsals, however, Gord began to wonder was going on. It could have taken an hour for Evaleigh to ready herself to greet her father, and another hour to relate to him the events of her kidnapping, imprisonment, and rescue. But now the purple of twilight was showing through the arrow slit that pierced the wall of the antechamber in which he was cooling his heels, and two hours had dragged into more than twice that length.

Just as Gord was getting up to venture forth to see if he had somehow been forgotten in the excitement of Evaleigh's return, the door to the room flew open, and armed soldiers filled the opening. An officer of the guard called him forth by name, stating that Gord was to come with him and receive his reward for his part in Lady Evaleigh's rescue. Gord was somewhat surprised at the stern and official manner of these men-at-arms, but then he knew nothing of nobility and their ways, save what little he had learned through Evaleigh, so he shrugged to himself and complied without question.

The officer and his six soldiers took him to yet another room, somewhere in the interior of the great castle, and there he was ordered to divest himself of weapons. When Gord hesitated, swordpoints pressed against him from behind, and the officer laughed at the consternation Gord evidenced.

"That you are a baseborn thief and masterless villain, our lord knows well. We were warned that you are dangerous with sword and dag, fellow, so this ploy was simply to disarm you without harm to any of His Noble Grace's loyal guardsmen."

Gord couldn't believe his ears. He tried to convince himself that this was not actually happening to him, but was merely another of the fretful dreams that had plagued him of late. "You are going to be in trouble, my good man, when this stupid error is set right," he said. "I think you should speak with Lady Evaleigh immediately, and save yourself and your fellows further embarrassment."

"Her Ladyship, knave, was with Count Blemu when he gave the order for your arrest," the officer sneered.

This statement left Gord dumbfounded, and he allowed himself to be stripped of his weapons, searched, and taken down to the castle's depths without resistance or further word. There the soldiers turned him over to the warden of the dungeon, and a gaoler thrust him into the small cell he

occupied now, manacling him to the back wall as further precaution before locking the iron-bound cell door.

At first, Gord had expected Evaleigh to appear and free him from this imprisonment. Surely, he told himself, this was a terrible mistake. But the days plodded past, one after another, slowly and heavily, without such intercession., Evaleigh did in fact send a message to him after a few days—reassurance that she would soon do something to help him, passed on to Gord in a whisper by one of the servants who brought him his pitiful daily ration of food.

There were a few more such meager reassurances during the following days, and Gord benefited from extra scraps of food sent by the girl to comfort and nourish her confined rescuer and former lover, but nothing else was forthcoming.

After a month or so, even these deliveries stopped, and Gord stopped keeping careful track of days.

In the early stages of his imprisonment, he had allowed himself to languish in depression, not even thinking about trying to escape—though he possessed the means to do so. He simply sat, wasting away mentally and physically in the damp and darkness of the dungeon cell, waiting gloomily for Evaleigh to make good on her promises to help him.

Then, when he realized that the messages from Evaleigh had stopped, Gord's mood changed abruptly. He resolved to find a way to revenge himself on both Count Blemu and his daughter for this cruel ingratitude.

The guards had searched him thoroughly, but had not thought to make him change his clothes—and it was virtually impossible for a guard to find all of the small tools a thief could conceal about his person. Gord reached inside his boot, pulled forth a length of wire, and quickly had the lock of the leg iron open. Being free of the shackle gave Gord the freedom he needed to commence a regimen of exercise. This he did, always replacing it around his ankle afterward so that no one would suspect what he was up to.

It was impossible for him, however, to open the cell door immediately, for the portal was secured on the outside by a heavy iron bar that dropped down in its locked position and prevented any prisoner from working it back. To move it, the flat bar had to be first lifted from outside and then drawn back—or so the theory went.

When not building his muscles and practicing his acrobatics and similar skills, Gord worked patiently at the wooden door, slowly scratching out an

elongated rectangle with the wire he used to pick the manacle's simple lock. Eventually, he worked a piece of wood out in a long, thick splinter, giving him access to the second layer of wood beneath.

He kept working at flaking away the wood behind the piece he had loosened, using dirt and spit to glue the splinter back in place each day before his food came. It would take a long time, but eventually he would have a hole through the door, a passage large enough to enable manipulation of the bolt. The cell door was three inches thick, but its own substance—the chunk he had worked free—would provide him the tool he needed to lift the bar, and the stiff wire would then push back the metal bolt. Gord would eventually be free of the cell—of this he was sure.

Had Evaleigh pleaded with her father to spare Gord? Recalling how they felt about each other, Gord could not help but think that she had. It was certainly Count Blemu's knowledge of their intimacy that had caused him to react as he did. Why Evaleigh had told her father about this, or under what circumstances, he could not imagine. That she had told her father too much about Gord was certain, and for this Gord blamed himself. He should not have spoken so freely to Evaleigh about his past, and he should have carefully coached her on what to tell her father about the rescue and journey.

Thoughts such as these, giving Evaleigh the benefit of the doubt, made Gord feel good about himself and provided him some comfort, but did not lessen his desire for evening the score. What became of her promise of undying love? Her pledge of reward for her safe return to her home? And certainly the "gratitude" of Count Blemu was another score to be settled—with interest! Gord came to grips, in a fashion, with the realization that there had never been real hope for him and Evaleigh, although he still thought that some elevation of his station, followed by a test of some sort, should have been allowed him. Success in this test should have been the measure of his actual worth, rather than judging him by artificial standards based on the perceived value of inherited rank that was so prized by these aristocrats. Well, Gord intended to show them the merit of his lowborn station!

More of the long days passed, and Gord finally completed the preparations necessary for his escape. The hole in the door was nearly through to the other side. Between periods of scratching away on the door, Gord had also worked patiently with the wire to pry loose the metal hasp

that fastened his leg chain to the stone wall. Now all was in readiness, and he would put his plan into action immediately. Many more days of this confinement would certainly drive him crazy, despite the routine of exercise and work to which he had dedicated himself.

On the eve of his escape attempt, he forced himself to rest for a long time, desiring to be as alert as he could be when the time came. His fitful slumber was interrupted by the arrival of his daily meal, which he knew from experience was the only time anyone would visit him until the following day—and by then, he expected to be long gone. He ate every last bit of the food, drank the water, and went to work.

First, the chain was freed from the wall. The hasp he tucked away in his filthy rags of clothing, for it might be useful for something later. The chain and manacle would be his only weapon, but a deadly one, for the heavy cuff on the end of the long series of iron links would act much as any flail-head. For the last time, he pried up the splinter of wood that concealed the hole he had created, and the final portion of his escape work commenced. Soon this vile cell would hold him captive no longer!

Gord wished fervently that he had been able to make the opening in the door larger, for the iron staple from the wall would have broken through the remaining quarter-inch or so of wood with rapid ease. But he had not dared to make a hole that large, for fear of the place being spotted by his gaolers. Breaking through this last thin barrier would take an hour or more to achieve with the wire, but what had to be, was. Gord bent to the task with diligence and high spirits, rubbing the wire's point back and forth, up and down, slowly scoring the perimeter of the opening so that eventually he would simply have to push and the plug would pop out against the bolt. Then the splinter, used as a lever, would press the bar down, and the wire would work the bar back from its fast position. Occasionally he had to stop the cutting motions and resharpen the wire tip on the stone next to him, but he didn't mind.

Perhaps the lord of this place had wished to execute him, Gord speculated as he worked. That was possible, considering his long incarceration: What purpose would the count have had for keeping him here for this much time? Probably, then, Evaleigh did assist him—persuading her father to spare Gord an immediate death in favor of a slow one, rotting for years in this dungeon.

Gord nodded to himself. Father and daughter both were responsible for this wretched situation, although the former far more than the latter. Gord felt a pang still when he thought of Evaleigh's breathtaking loveliness and their love for each other—or, more accurately, his love and whatever passed for that emotion in her. No… he was being bitter. He had been in love with her, and she had loved him, too. Gord could not force himself to hate her; he reserved that emotion for His Noble Grace Dunstan, Count of Blemu, Lord of Knurl.

The strength of that hate acted upon his muscles, and without realizing it Gord pressed harder as he scored the tough oaken fibers. The force cracked the last bit of wood free on one side, and the sudden giving way surprised the young man. "Damn!" he muttered to himself, almost losing his grip on the wire. He pushed against the loose side with the tip of the wire, and a small piece of wood broke free and dropped away.

The tiny sound of the sliver hitting the flagstone outside his cell brought him joy. He worked feverishly to splinter away the remainder of the plug. Dim light filtered through the opening, showing the iron bolt that held the door shut.

"Now I've got you, you bastard!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Come on now, darling, you can do it!" Freedom was just inches away!

The splinter from the door and the wire soon did their duty. It was difficult to manipulate both through the small hole, but Gord was dexterous and nimble of finger, as suited one of his profession. The bolt moved away, little by little, and when it passed from his view off to the side of the hole, Gord brought the wire back inside and carefully bent the end of it at a right angle. Using the splinter for added leverage, he pushed sideways to force the tip of the wire against the end of the bar. Then the bolt moved another inch or so, and Gord knew he had succeeded.

Being careful to remain calm despite his exhilaration, he took time to stand up and spend a couple of minutes stretching and flexing to loosen his strained and tense muscles. Then he pushed gently on the door. It groaned on its hinges and swung outward an inch or so.

"Quiet!" he hissed to the protesting metal. "Do you wish to warn those dirty buggers before I have a chance for revenge?"

But he knew the noise of the hinges could not be helped. Gord shoved the heavy portal open a full foot, quickly, and slid between it and the jamb with equal haste. After looking left and right, peering with squinting eyes into a

dimly illuminated passage that seemed to his aching pupils to radiate brightness, Gord ventured forth. No guard had heard the noise, no gaoler was hastening to investigate!

He closed the cell door, shot the bar silently, and scuffed the bits of wood into the shadows; no sense in alerting any passerby to his absence. The right path seemed to lead off to other portions of this subterranean complex, but the route to the left meant freedom. This was the direction he heard his gaolers come from, and in the light given off by a torch in a holder far down the corridor, he could see a door that he hoped would lead to a stairway. Chain held at the ready, Gord crept with utmost stealth toward the light.

As he neared the end of the passage, he heard voices coming from behind the partly opened door of a chamber off to the side. This, he supposed, was the place in which the dungeon warden and possibly a gaoler kept their post. They only did their duty, the escaping thief thought to himself, but that meant nothing to him. Gord thought their jobs lowly and disgusting, and if he could he would slay both without qualm or hint of mercy.

By this time Gord could see very well in the brownish illumination, and before him were the men who stood between him and escape to the world above. He might be able to slip past the chamber and get to the other doorway, only a few paces farther away, without being noticed by them, but with their garments and weapons, he would have a better chance to slip out of the castle—unless he could find the count quickly and settle that matter first! Otherwise, Gord would make for Knurl, gather resources, and work out a sure plan….

Enough thought—it was time for action! Chain ready at his side, he crept up to the doorway leading into the small room where warden and gaoler were sitting and talking idly. By peering slightly around the edge of the portal, he could see the warden in a chair no more than three feet from the door, facing toward the interior of the room. He had them by surprise and would kill them now!

Gord raised the chain over his head. Just as he was about to leap into the place and smash his makeshift weapon upon the unsuspecting head of the warden, the door leading to the castle above was flung open, and four men ran through. "Stop on your life!" one shouted as he saw what was about to transpire. The first soldier through the door was upon Gord an instant later, and used his halberd to intercept the chain.

Gord was caught, and he knew it. He turned to stare defiance at these men who had thwarted his escape—and looked full into *both* of Gellor's laughing eyes!

Chapter 22

"Didn't I warn you, Constable, that Captain Gord was one of His August Supremacy's most dangerous agents?" said Gellor to a richly dressed noble accompanying the two guardsmen. "It is a wonder he hasn't escaped before this—and slain half of your men-at-arms in the process."

"The word of General Lord Nalbon Gellor is unquestioned," the constable said unctuously while looking disdainfully at the pale and filthy former prisoner who had just been prevented from braining one of his men. "But how could we have known, Lord Gellor, that he was other than a scheming thief? He claimed no ties to Nyrond or the Urnsts…."

"Come, come, Sir Mellard, don't be naive!" Gellor said in bluff fashion, slapping the sour-faced official on the back. "Look at him even now. Does he show the slightest hint of understanding our discourse? Does his gaze or expression betray any clue? Nay! That is why he is regarded so highly by King Archbold and the noble rulers of Urnstland too!"

Gord was indeed looking blank, for he understood only that his old associate Gellor, a thief of Stoink, had mysteriously grown an eye, was being treated deferentially by Count Blemu's henchmen, and was here in this forsaken dungeon evidently freeing him.

"Well, I must admit he has a rather… ahh… dazed look, which could throw off an inquisitor," said the constable.

"In fact, one might think him an idiot!"

Both men laughed heartily at this, but Gord saw no humor in a remark at his expense. He grew somewhat miffed at the whole conversation, in fact, which excluded him and more or less treated him as a piece of beef. "Just what is going on here, Gellor?" Gord demanded.

The formerly one-eyed thief gave Gord a tiny, brief wink with an eye that should not have been there, and replied, "Oh! Sorry, captain. Didn't mean to ignore you, but Constable Mellard here took a good bit of convincing when I finally caught up with you. He actually didn't believe that you were one of our best spies, and that His August Supremacy would be quite wroth with the good constable's master, Count Blemu, if Archbold learned that you were locked up in his dungeons…. Imagine!"

Constable Sir Mellard's expression grew sour at this, and then it changed to worry as Gellor continued.

"After all, think of His Supremacy's embarrassment if word ever got out that one of his own vassals, and a recently enfeoffed one at that, starved to

death in his dungeon a trusted member of Archbold's personal staff? Then there's the slight matter of ingratitude, and the *noblesse oblige.* Not quite right to imprison a chap for saving his daughter and all."

"That," said Gord, seizing upon the mention of the count's behavior toward him, "I intend to settle in my own way—"

"Captain! You are out of order!" Gellor interjected sternly. "Such matters are the affairs of your betters. I am certain His August Supremacy will deal with the whole business in his own way… in time."

The inference was unmistakable, and the count's constable grew pale as the impact of the words sunk in. The officials of a noble might become scapegoats in such an affair as this. "I must say, Your Lordship, Captain Gord, there is no need for such bitterness. A mistake—and a father's natural desire to preserve his daughter's name and all—which will soon be rectified with none the worse for it."

"None the worse?" Gord shot back. "None the worse, you say?"

"You will be recompensed, sir—and handsomely, never fear," Sir Mellard interjected hastily. "And of course you shall receive the personal apology of His Lordship of Blemu!"

"Yes, yes, that's quite proper and will suffice," said Gellor before Gord managed another furious word. "But this dungeon is no place for chit-chat. Come, Constable, let us repair to above, where my officer can bathe and be properly attired while you and I exchange a few pleasantries. I would learn of your struggle against the Jebli tribes to the north."

Apologizing for not suggesting such a thing himself, Sir Mellard led the way to the castle above, going off to a parlor with the man he called Lord Nalbon Gellor, while Gord was hustled off to a room where a *valet de chambre* fussed and bustled. In a short time Gord was scrubbed, oiled, barbered, and arrayed in silk and velvet of ebon hue. When he came back from the dressing room to the main chamber of these quarters, he found that his confiscated weapons had been returned, clean and polished, complete with new belt and scabbards. He checked the dagger, found it intact, and noted that it had been lightly oiled to prevent any spot of corrosion on its keen blade. Beside his weapons lay his purse, and examination proved that its contents—eight bright gold orbs and a scattering of lesser coins—had not been tampered with. Gord smiled wryly at all of this—from one extreme of treatment to the other, and all in a matter of minutes!

Then a knock sounded on the door, and the valet ushered in an officer of the Count's Guard, come to escort Gord to the chamber where Gellor and Sir Mellard waited. The now-grand young thief strode as an honored guest through the halls of Castle Blemu to find what awaited him next.

He was shown to a small dining salon whose board had been set for a repast. Gellor was there, along with Sir Mellard and several other of the count's underlings. After Gord was seated, the constable explained to him that His Lordship of Blemu was indisposed and sent his regrets, but that he, Sir Mellard, would serve as host for this banquet in honor of Captain Gord's good fortune. Gord let that questionable remark pass, for the smell and sight of the feast laid out before him on the table were overwhelming his senses. He was famished, after having been nearly starved for so long, and all he cared to think about now was eating!

The banquet commenced immediately, and more vintages and dishes appeared at intervals as the diners fell to. It was some time before Gord's stomach felt satisfied and he began to pay attention to the conversation. The talk was of the warfare with the humanoid bands still infesting the upper regions of the Blemu Hills, and how the count's forces were gradually driving these hateful creatures northward. Gord heard that companies of gnomes were assisting, and that the Ratikkans were holding Johnsport and besieging Spinecastle, for they too were desirous of revenge upon the humanoid inhabitants of Bone March. Revenge was a subject dear to his heart, so Gord began to question various persons about the matter.

He learned that some years previous, hordes of orcs, goblins, and their ilk had taken occupation of the Bone March, a former dependency of the Overking of Aerdy. After that time, this area had been a haven for all sorts of evil and degenerate types, and a base for incursion into the surrounding territories by the humanoids and their human associates. However, when Nyrond managed to take Knurl, and Dunstan was made Lord Blemu, the newly created count began to expand his fief northward, displacing the humanoids by force of arms. This effort was assisted by gnomes, for these demi-humans hated the invaders and were loosely allied with His August Supremacy, Archbold III, King of Nyrond and liege of Lord Blemu.

The Great Kingdom, as Aerdy styled itself, was in turmoil, as usual, so the Overking was unwilling or unable to make any response to this assault on territory that was technically his to protect. The area beyond the Teesar Torrent had always been much trouble for the Overking anyway, as had

been the Bone March. Distant and well-armed marcher lords were always rebellious and bothersome at best, and the Overking undoubtedly reasoned that such troubles were better vested with Rel Mord, the capital of King Archbold's domain, than with his throne in Rauxes. In addition, the Overking perceived the Herzog of Aerdy's semi-independent North Province as a worse threat than a Nyrondel county west of the Teesar Torrent's swift waters. Let the Herzog deal with the matter if he could, reasoned the Overking, thus keeping the Herzog and the King of Nyrond busy with each other.

The affair had come out somewhat differently, however.

Smarting over a humiliating defeat by the forces of the Bone March, the Herzog ignored Blemu and marched a newly gathered host of soldiers back into the humanoid-controlled territory to avenge himself. But the Herzog's host was again defeated, and the broken remnants retreated in disarray all the way to Eastfair, the capital of North Province.

However, the series of skirmishes and battles that led to this second humiliation also took their toll upon the hordes of humanoids and their human allies. Left in a battered and seriously weakened condition, they were ripe for attack by Ratik. The Lord Baron of that palatinate did just that, desiring to extend his territory southward. One of his armies sallied through the pass leading from Ratikhill to Spinecastle, laying siege to the latter town, while another force came secretly through Loftwood Forest and fell upon Johnsport, taking it almost immediately.

The current situation was that both Ratik and Blemu were attempting to gobble up as much land as possible before the chiefs of the humanoids and the petty human lords of Bone March were able to regroup, reinforce themselves, and act in concert to prevent further erosion of their holdings. Many of the Bone March's raiding bands and tribes were still in the North Province, fighting and pillaging. There was some question as to whether these raiders would eventually return to their homeland, or whether the Herzog's re-assembling army would manage to pick these bands off, one by one.

There was more, but what struck Gord as most interesting was the distance between Knurl and the Nyrondel capital city, Rel Mord, which was more than one hundred fifty leagues, and the fact that they were separated by the wilderness of the Flinty Hills. Could Dunstan be flirting with ideas of independence for Blemu? Allying with the northern realm of Ratik, and

playing off Rel Mord against Rauxes, might enable a clever noble to gain sovereignty.

If indeed such thoughts were uppermost in the count's mind, then he would be dreadfully concerned about the ramifications of Gord's imprisonment, Gellor's discovery of the action, and intelligence reaching King Archbold—all supposing that the once one-eyed man actually was the king's general, and that Gord was one of His August Supremacy's most valuable agents. Gord knew, of course, that the latter was totally fallacious, but Lord Blemu thought it the truth. If he indeed plotted to renounce his vow of fealty and seize independence, then he would most likely over-react to this minor situation, which would be to Gord's advantage. Interesting, indeed….

Eventually the conversation waned to desultory remarks, as full belly and fine wine took blood from brain to stomach. It had grown late besides, and the evening was finally ended by the constable wishing all a good night's rest and cheerful morrow. As Gord and Gellor made ready to leave, Sir Mellard came to them and assured the two that all would be in readiness for them at dawn, just as the Lord General had directed.

"It is most regrettable that the officers of His August Supremacy will be unable to remain a few days at the castle," Sir Mellard said without conviction. "Although the facilities will be strained to capacity with all the wedding guests, personages such as yourselves, representing the Royal Court, would be most welcome and well-quartered for the event."

"Wedding guests?" queried Gord.

"Never mind that, captain," said Gellor quickly. "I am tired, and we must be away on business of the king by first light! Come along, and I'll inform you of the happy event that Sir Mellard referred to as we go—you've been a bit out of touch, shall we say?"

Gord was unwilling to let the matter drop, for he did not quite trust Gellor to give him the whole truth, and wished to get to the bottom of it by questioning the obsequious constable then and there. However, he recognized a firmness in Gellor's urging, despite its friendly tone, and in the way his "general" turned abruptly and headed for the door, expecting Gord to follow. His wisdom told him that silence and patience were the wiser course, so he turned on his heel and also left the dining room swiftly, doing as he was ordered.

Gellor refused to say anything at all on the matter, however, when they arrived at the small suite assigned to them. Using the Thieves' Cant, and hand signs, Gellor cautioned Gord to mind his tongue, for walls hid many things, including listeners. Once they were well away from the castle, said Gellor in the secret tongue, he would tell Gord everything he wished to know, but for tonight they must remain stolid officers of the King of Nyrond, here now merely to refresh themselves with a night's sleep before going on next day to carry out the secret affairs of His August Supremacy. Grudgingly, Gord agreed, and soon both men were tucked in their beds, located in adjoining chambers behind unlocked doors. Gord, unused to anything softer than a bit of mildewed straw scattered on a stone floor, thought the softness of the bed would prevent slumber. He was quite mistaken, for sleep overtook him in a moment, and he barely stirred for the rest of the night.

A restrained tapping on the door of his room brought Gord awake. This was followed by a rustling sound as someone moved into the chamber. Gord opened his eyes, his muscles tense, his hand going instinctively to the dagger at his bedside even as he turned to see who had intruded upon him. It was merely the fussy valet who had attended to him yesterday, now engrossed in his morning ministrations. It was still dark outside, and the servant carried a candle with him. He had deposited a stack of garments on a nearby stand and was now in the process of setting flame to a half-dozen tapers so as to illuminate the room. When the task was finished, he turned and saw Gord watching him.

"Good morning, sir," said the servant. "It is nearly first light, and I have come to assist you in dressing and preparing for your departure."

Gord harrumphed but swung his legs out of bed and arose. As the valet fussed with the stack of garments, separating things and laying them out, Gord washed and otherwise went through his unaccustomed morning toilet. In the meantime, the fancy clothing he had been given to wear yesterday, and which he had tossed casually aside when retiring, had been picked up, brushed, and painstakingly folded and stowed in a small leather pack—evidently for Gord to take along when he departed. The valet handed him new linen and then insisted on helping Gord dress.

The apparel he had been given today was designed for rougher activity: heavy stockings, short breeches of leather, with a like doublet worn over a linen blouse. This ensemble was all in black, and completed with high

riding boots, gloves, soft cap, and cloak. Another set of small clothes was packed away as Gord broke his fast with fresh bread, cheese, salty-sour galda fruit, and watered wine. The valet hastened to hand him a napkin as soon as it was evident that he was through, and then whisked away the remains of the meal, leaving Gord alone in the room and wondering what would happen next. He went to his weapons and began buckling the shortsword to his waist when another rap sounded on his bedroom door, this one much more important-sounding than the servant's taps.

Gord called for the entrance of the one so knocking, and in came Sir Mellard, followed by a churl bearing several bundles. The constable ordered him to place his burdens gently on the bed, dismissed the fellow, and then spoke to Gord.

"The busy affairs of the coming celebration again prevent my master, Count Blemu, from personally attending to your wishes ere you depart. He has sent me personally to see that all is satisfactory, however, and I am at your disposal." At the last portion of his speech, the constable appeared pained indeed. He managed to go on, though, with only a slight grimace and a swallow.

"Humblest apologies are given you for having… detained you in so unkind a fashion. Had you but mentioned your service to His August Supremacy—but no matter! I am instructed to personally crave your pardon, and humbly beg forgiveness for my part in the… ah… misunderstanding…." Sir Mellard paused expectantly.

"Get on with it, man!" Gord ordered him, allowing his pent-up anger and general dislike for the fellow to permeate his tone.

The constable winced and nearly flew into a fury himself at the outrage of a mere soldier speaking to him in such a manner. But then he recalled his mission, the instructions of his lord, and the supposed station of Gord as captain and agent of the King of Nyrond's personal corps. Composing himself again, Sir Mellard resumed his speech.

"Lord Blemu, in his generosity, and to emphasize the depth of his regrets, bestows upon you the following gifts." The constable paused here and turned to the packages, lifting them one by one as he talked. "First, here is a purse of coins to assist you comfortably on your return to Rel Mord.

"Next, this blade," the constable continued, unwrapping and holding forth in near-formal presentation a beautifully crafted small sword, "is a prize captured from a brigand chieftain from the northern border. It is wrought

from an alloy of steel and adamantite, I am told, and then enchanted so as to pierce dragon's scale or foeman's plate without losing any of its point or edge.

"Last, but by no means least, my Lord Count gifts you with this silver neck-chain, a piece taken from his personal coffer, and set with garnets highly polished to enhance its beauty." Sir Mellard held it out toward Gord. "See, it bears the arms of Count Blemu himself as its chiefmost decoration! It will show that you have his noble favor."

"Is that all?" Gord asked icily.

"All? AM?" sputtered the constable. "You so dare as to—" and then he again recalled his mission. He took one deep breath, forcing a smile to his lips and calmness into his tone, and then said, "There is one more thing which comes from His Lordship…. May I speak freely as gentleman to… ah…gentleman?"

"You may, sir," Gord allowed graciously.

"In the matter of your… ah… stay here. Need it be emphasized in your report to the king? Lord Blemu *has* been most generous in making amends, and he is concerned that His August Supremacy might mistake overzealousness for some darker motive…."

At that moment, Gellor came in from his adjoining chamber. Gord immediately suspected that he had overheard the conversation and was timing his entrance accordingly.

"It is not a matter worth any further consideration, or note," Gellor boomed in a hearty voice. "Be a good fellow and tell your good Count just that. General Gellor and Captain Gord understand the whole affair was an error, and who amongst us errs not? It is a trivial thing of history, best forgotten," he said reassuringly as he guided the constable to the door. "But do relate to His Lordship that his generosity will long be recalled whenever Blemu Castle comes to mind!"

Beaming, Sir Mellard departed, assuring the two that they would have the swiftest and finest of coursers, with appropriate trappings, awaiting upon their departure. He then hurried away, and Gord looked at Gellor to see if he could determine what the fellow was up to.

Gellor was dressed in much the same fashion as Gord was, with a belt bearing longsword and dagger girding his loins. Gord noted that he too had a fat purse, and wore a long neck-chain, but Gellor's chain was of golden links and roundels and bore three deep blue sapphires each flanked by a pair

of smaller diamonds. Gord opened his mouth to utter a comment about rank bribery, but his companion stifled it by waving a finger at him and winking with the eye that should not have been there. Gord thought the gesture was growing more than a bit tiresome.

"Let us be off, Captain Gord!" said Gellor with vigor. "We have far to go, and much to speak of as we ride!"

Chapter 23

True to the constable's promise, a pair of magnificent warhorses awaited Gord and Gellor in the outer bailey of Castle Blemu, saddled and ready, each black stallion held by a liveried groom. These were not the huge and muscled destriers of cavaliers and fully armored men, but the leaner and smaller mounts favored by those who desired swiftness and endurance. Saddlebags of provisions were topped by the leather cases containing the finery each of them had worn the past evening. As Gord was mounting, a small page scurried out of the great hall and ran to stand at his stirrup.

"Your pardon, sir, but my mistress, Lady Evaleigh, bade me fetch you this on your departure," the page said, and he held up a small casket of engraved and embellished silver for Gord's taking.

"Where is your mistress?" Gord demanded, accepting the box but not bothering to look at its contents.

"Oh, sir, she went off to His Lordship the Count's villa in Knurl, yesterday it was…. But before she and her ladies departed, she told me most sternly to see that I deliver this to you," the lad said, pointing at the silver coffer.

"Very well. It is delivered." Gord nodded toward the boy, tossed him a copper hastily dug from his purse, and wheeled his horse to follow Gellor, who was already heading for the gate.

The two of them passed through the gate in single file, and Gord held a position slightly behind Gellor as their mounts trotted out onto the road. He wanted a bit of privacy while he examined Evaleigh's gift, and Gellor seemed to understand this.

The box was quite pretty and valuable. Gord thought that, even being in used condition as it was, it would bring an orb or more in some fine shop. It was old, and had been crafted in a form Gord had never seen before. It took him a couple of minutes to find which petals and carven flowers to press and move to release its catch and allow the lid to slide back. The coffer was lined with velvet material of a deep violet hue, which surrounded a small scroll and something wrapped in silk embroidered with sigils. Gord dropped the reins and took out the scroll. His mount slowed to a walk as his eyes took in what was written thereupon:

"My dearest Gord,

"I shall always bear your memory in my heart, just as I shall always remember our time of love together. If troubles surround me, all I needs do is recall your sweet face and brave deeds, and my world brightens. Ours was a love which could not be. Forgive my weakness, I implore. Understand my father's ill-advised ire. Think of me fondly, with tenderness and affection, now and then as you rise to fortune. As for me, I shall make the best of what sad and cruel fate metes out. I pray for your happiness and safety always, and send my dearest of thoughts with you, My Champion.

"Always, Evaleigh."

These words, soft as they were, did nothing to dilute the bitterness in Gord's heart; in fact, he reacted in quite the opposite way, and he found himself thinking of Evaleigh as a liar and a bitch as he roughly thrust the scroll back into the box and picked up the parcel of silk. In its folds was the little necklace of silver links with the milky amulet depending from them—Evaleigh's dearest possession, the dweomered pendant given her by her elven great-great-grandmother.

This gift had an entirely different effect on Gord from the way he had felt just after reading the scroll. His attitude toward Evaleigh softening with every passing heartbeat, he fastened the chain around his neck and tucked the amulet under the stiff leather and padding of his doublet. Then, instead of hurling the missive she had written to him away in a crumpled ball, as he had originally thought to do, Gord flattened it and tucked it into the small inner pocket of this same garment. After placing the silver box within a saddlebag, he spurred his stallion so as to get even with Gellor's mount, trying his best to put Evaleigh out of his mind for the moment—he had much to learn from his traveling companion, and it was high time to start doing just that!

Gord's saturnine expression and lugubrious spirits were soon uplifted by Gellor's tale. He admitted to Gord that while he was indeed a member of Stoink's guild of thieves, and a well-respected member of that and other bandit communities as well, he had other identities. Yes, Gellor admitted, he did on occasion serve Archbold as an agent and spy; however, his liege was not the King of Nyrond by any means, but rather his cousin, Belissica, Her Noble Brilliancy, Sovereign Countess of Urnst. In fact, Gellor said laughingly, he even performed favors for his more distant cousin, Karll, Most Lordly Grace of Duchy Urnst!

All of this left Gord speechless. Gellor observed his dumbfounded visage, roared with mirth, winked his newly grown eye, and laughed still more at the perturbed reaction this gesture got from his companion.

"I must begin where we parted company," said Gellor as his chuckling subsided and he wiped tears of laughter from his eyes, "and then you will understand better what has transpired." The thief and noble then began a tale that enthralled Gord so thoroughly that he failed to notice that Gellor was leading the way away from Knurl toward the ferry to the west bank of the Harp River.

He related how the sovereigns of Nyrond and other allied and friendly states spent much in human and monetary resources to be apprised of the plots and politics of their unfriendly and hostile neighbors. The Bandit Kingdoms, as these sovereigns called the lands of the Free Lords, were of particular interest—but then no more so than the doings of the Hierarchs of the Horned Society, the dealings of Tenh and the Theocrat of the Pale, Aerdian schemes (whether those of the Overking or the Malachite Throne of Rauxes), and so forth.

Although Evaleigh's capture and the subsequent ransom demand from Boss Dhaelhy were not great matters as far as statecraft went, King Archbold desired intelligence on what followed these events, for he suspected that his vassal, Count Dunstan of Blemu, was overweening in ambition. The question was: Would the count send forth to Stoink the ransom required for his daughter's return? The sum being demanded was so great as to pauperize the count, or so it was thought, and it was well known that he was no doting parent.

If the ransom was not paid, Archbold's reasoning went, then the king's suspicions about Dunstan would be allayed; this would mean that he did not have the resources to bring about his daughter's release, or else he did not possess the desire to see her freed. In either event, this was not the sort of behavior that would engender respect for the count from other heads of state—and such respect was a necessary component of any plan the count might have to assert the sovereignty of his small domain. But if the ransom was handed over to Boss Dhaelhy, the king would do well to heed the warnings he had received about the count's hubris.

"Then you came along and spoiled things!" Gellor said as they came to the vessel moored beside the river bank. "Let us get aboard this ferry, and I'll continue my tale."

"Yes, let us," urged Gord, now caught up in the story and left in suspense as to how he had intervened in the plots and machinations of crowned heads.

"The problem was, everyone was watching for a company of the count's men escorting the gold for his daughter's ransom," Gellor resumed, skirting the issue of how Gord disrupted any scheme but that of Boss Dhaelhy. Gord urged him to get on to that point, but Gellor simply smiled and continued the line of discourse he had begun.

He explained how the Boss of Stoink, several other interested parties of that ilk, Gellor himself—and even Evaleigh!—had spies watching for ransom-carriers from Blemu. The captive girl, it seemed, had used her charm, and possibly a bit of her magic, to suborn at least two of Lord Mayor Dhaelhy's hirelings or servants. For the sake of both her peace of mind and her physical safety, she, more than anyone else, wished to know news of her impending rescue.

By the time Gord had appeared on the scene, her hopes were at their lowest ebb, for time would be up soon, and there had been no news of any force of Count Blemu's, or even one in his employ, heading for Stoink. Had there been, Evaleigh of course would never have risked life and limb in a perilous escape attempt formulated—or unformulated, as was more accurately the case—by a young thief of uncertain origin and questionable motives! Gord had to grin at that last statement.

"Off this scow now, lad," said Gellor as the ferry was moored on the opposite bank. "Now we ride cross-country for the Flinties and the burrows of gnomekind."

"Flinties? Gnomes? What is this talk, Gellor?"

"Do you tire of my story already?" said Gellor with a sly grin. "Are you suddenly more interested in what we must do next ere we are free to pursue a more independent course?"

"Oh, no, good sir!" said Gord, a hint of friendly sarcasm in his tone. "The past for now, the future for later." So Gellor picked up his original tale as their steeds trotted westward.

"Dunstan is a most clever chap," Gellor began. "Not as wily as he deems himself, by any stretch of the mind, but clever enough to outwit all those watching for his train bearing a virtual king's ransom in orbs. The Boss was eager to receive the train, of course, and Evaleigh was anxious to learn it was coming so she could be free—but most of those on the lookout for the

caravan desired only to loot it. To thwart this last group of road-watchers, the Count of Blemu made arrangements, and sent messengers accordingly, so that the sum was gathered within the walls of Stoink itself."

"How could that be?" demanded the wondering listener.

"Oh, it isn't a new idea, only one which is most uncommon and rarely used," Gellor replied, nodding contemplatively. "Sums are borrowed and lent between certain dealers in jewels, money changers, bankers, and the like. They have devised a means to transfer large amounts by means of written notes. Naturally, these notes are carefully done, and heavily magicked, but once executed are as good as gold!"

This amazed the young thief, for he had imagined that he knew just about all there was to know about wealth. Gellor then explained to him that such instruments had away of taking on a sort of mystical value themselves, becoming as dear as—or even dearer than—the physical things they represented, be they precious metals, gems, silk, spices, or something else.

On the very day and night that Gord had planned and executed his brash rescue of the lady in durance vile, an agent of. her father's sending was in Stoink, carrying with him a document calling for transfer of metal equivalent to ten thousand gold orbs from certain persons in the town of the lord mayor. The sum was so vast an amount that it took two days to gather.

"Had you acted but one day later," Gellor pointed out to Gord, "you would have found the lady Evaleigh gone, bound for her homeland under a heavily armed guard furnished by her former captor, Boss Dhaelhy! If anything, a ransomer must be true to his word, or he shall have but a single go at kidnap and payment, you know, so the boss planned to see the girl delivered to the count's protection with care and safety."

At that, Gord had to laugh bitterly…. Some hero he had turned out to be! Evaleigh's journey home would have been faster, easier, and much safer if he had not invaded the lord mayor's castle—and, more to the point, he would never have laid eyes on the walls of the count's dungeon!

Gellor agreed, in response to a wry observation from Gord, that things were not always as they seemed. The news, he went on, was soon buzzing through the bandit capital of Gord's taking of the girl from under the boss' nose.

"He was furious," said Gellor, "both at the insult and the loss of a fortune! No amount of searching turned you up, and several powerful spell-casters were required to finally track down your means of escape. But the same

magic-users were then unable to locate you anywhere, and they claimed that powerful dweomers protected you two. There was no ransom paid, of course, for word of Evaleigh's disappearance reached those gathering the gold, and they quickly returned their thousands to vault and strongroom forthwith. That saved Dunstan his coin, but the fact he had agreed to pay alerted me that something was most certainly amiss. There are means of communication that allow near-instantaneous transmission of speech, but these magical communications must be most secret and protected from the many who would overhear or intercept. It required several days, but eventually I managed to pass on the intelligence, and then I came after you two."

At this point the two riders came to a lane leading northwest. Gellor steered his mount onto the path, saying, "Now I think it best to give my throat a rest until we partake of some refreshment." Gord followed his lead, of course, and the pair rode in silence. After a short time, they arrived in a rustic little hamlet. There they supped at a local tavern, while their mounts were fed and watered. An hour later the pair cantered on, still following the dirt road as it wound its way toward the first great tors of the Flinty Hills.

Gellor had not desired to resume his narrative during their meal, because the tale was for Gord's ears alone. Once out of the hamlet, however, he further dealt with his tracing of Evaleigh and her rescuer. It had not been difficult to determine the goal that was set, but the exact route was the question. Boss Dhaelhy's minions had searched far and wide, but they missed by days locating the fleeing couple. Gellor had picked up the trail in Midmeadow, using the activity of agents of the bandit lord to put him on the scent, as it were. There was a delay, for he had had to eliminate several of these odious fellows, including the assassin who led them. This forced Gellor to spend further time avoiding those who would track him down for daring to handle so roughly the servants of Stoink, and by the time all that blew over, and Boss Dhaelhy called the whole thing off, more than a week had passed.

There was difficulty finding where Gord and Lady Evaleigh had gone from Womtham, and Gellor had ridden all the way to Innspa before eventually discovering that the two had not journeyed all that distance with the pilgrims. Between such delays as those he had recounted, and pauses for passing various sorts of information to one group or another, Gellor said

ruefully that nearly a month was frittered away before he caught up with the trail once again.

The hillmen were quite impressed by Gord's fighting ability, he said parenthetically, for these wild and independent folk thought bravery and self-defense to be paramount virtues. In any event, Gellor went on, it was no task at all to determine thereafter that Gord and Evaleigh had managed to get to her father's fief without further mishap. However, careful inquiries in Knurl brought no mention of Gord's name. All that was known was that the count's daughter had mysteriously reappeared at Castle Blemu.

Finding what had become of Gord was important to him, but Gellor had to state flatly that there were more important matters to clear up first. Dunstan had been sending a stream of communications to Lexnol, His Valorous Prominence of Ratik. These related to a proposed alliance between the baron and the count, and were to be sealed by nuptials between Baron Ratik's son, Alain, destined to become the fourth Baron Ratik bearing that name, and the count's fair daughter, Evaleigh.

At this point Gord grew grim and interjected an oath, but Gellor calmed him sufficiently to continue relating the story before long. He helped the young thief to understand that politics and ambition were the moving forces behind what had transpired. Ratik is a backward place, but not so isolated as not to have its own spies and informants. The baron questioned the count as to the matter of Evaleigh's kidnap and return, delicately inquiring as to her virginity. In this matter a lie will not do, and so it came to pass that the count had to dower his daughter with much gold for the marriage contract to be completed and the secret alliance forged.

In the course of discovering all this, Gellor had also found out that there was a nameless prisoner in the dungeon of Castle Blemu. With this knowledge, Gellor assumed the identity of General Nalbon of the House of Gellor, and Gord knew the rest. The alliance between the Ratikkan ruling dynasty and Dunstan was not in itself undesirable. The King of Nyrond was indeed pleased to have one of his vassals related to a potentially active enemy of Aerdy—so long as that vassal was still loyal to Archbold III.

"A realm stretching from Relmor Bay to Solnor Ocean, bounded by the Teesar Torrent, titillates the ambitions of His August Supremacy," said Gellor. "When I send word of all I have learned to Rel Mord, it is a good bet that Castle Blemu shall have royal visitors soon, and thereafter certain

fortresses containing the king's own soldiers shall be constructed at the expense of the count, and their upkeep assisted by the loyal Dunstan!"

"Indeed that is a tale for which I thank you, my friend," Gord said. "So my dear Evaleigh is to become the Palatine Baroness of Ratik… and dwell amidst the chill and barbarous wilds of that place while I roam freely through the warmer climes and am free to love whoever pleases me!" As that revelation came over him, Gord had to laugh. Gellor joined in with fellow feeling.

"Yes, indeed!" Gellor said brightly. "And her visits south to her father's country shall be from a sovereign state to a part of the Kingdom of Nyrond—not a jaunt through a new realm composed of Ratik, Bone March, and Blemu's fair hills and dells!"

"Where now?" asked Gord, his mood considerably brighter than it had been a couple of minutes ago.

"To the Gnomeking of these hills, and then what say you to a visit to Rel Mord? From there, who knows… perhaps south to Almor or back to the Bandit Kingdoms."

"I have never traveled to Nyrond's great capital," Gord replied with enthusiasm. "It sounds like a good place to see—and then, I'm ready for any new place in this broad land!"

As they made camp for the night, Gord spoke to his friend. "You are older and wiser than I, Gellor. Tell me how Evaleigh could put aside love such as we shared for a liaison to a petty northern barony, albeit an independent realm."

"Gord, my young friend, you are not being either realistic or fair. Would you have loved your little part-elven lass half so much had she been not so fair of face and form?" Gord was allowed a moment to ponder that, and then Gellor expanded upon the thought. "Did you pledge her true and faithful love forever? Or was it ardor and amour? What bright future did you paint? How would your children have been cared for?"

"Children? Future? What talk is that?" responded Gord. "We had passion and adventure, romance and excitement."

"That is the stuff of dalliance and brief affairs, my lad, not a basis for an enduring relationship! Think on it: Evaleigh is young and beautiful, but female. She, as do all of her sex, seeks security, stability, sons and daughters. You, as a male, desire to spread your offspring far and wide, the

more the merrier. Thus you gain a measure of immortality, for some will be certain to survive and carry on your line.

"In contrast, Evaleigh is aware that her own heritage must be limited to those children she herself bears. They must be cared for, nourished in mind and body, so that they thrive and grow to adulthood. That is how women gain their continuance, and it is quite the opposite of males!"

"But—"

"But me no buts, Gord. Your sweet Evaleigh did no more than any maid would do under like circumstances. She did no wrong by acquiescing to wedlock with one of like station and the comfort of being sovereign Baroness of Ratik. You would never lead such a life as will her devoted husband, and that is the sort of life she knows and desires. Had she gone off with you it would have been argument and unhappiness. You seek adventure, she the opposite. Eventually, you would have gone off and never returned, and then where would Evaleigh and your children have turned?"

"Children again? Why always that subject? None might have come."

"And what if your bastard will one day rule Ratik?" Gellor shot back, but then softened his voice and continued. "Come now, Gord, enough of this banter. Let's examine the bribes given us by the deceitful Count Blemu whilst I still have this cursed ocular in place!"

"What means ocular?" queried Gord.

"This globe here," said Gellor, suppressing a smile as he tapped his left eyeball with his forefinger.

Gord recoiled at the sight of the nailed digit rapping against tender eye, but as there was no apparent pain or flinch on Gellor's part, Gord's reaction abruptly turned to bewilderment.

"You tap your pupil and feel nothing?" said the young thief quizzically.

"Of course not! It is a magical sphere, enchanted to appear to be nothing more than my own eye, but it is far different and quite difficult to get used to—or to wear for long periods, as it boggles my brain."

Scrutiny revealed nothing magical to Gord, merely a clear gray eye. "You jest. Give me the truth, Gellor!"

"No jest at all," said Gellor, and with that he reached up and popped the orb out of its socket. A wave of nausea washed over Gord as he watched the process and saw the eye now in Gellor's palm.

"Now I must put it back," continued Gellor, "so we can see our gifts in true sight. But at least your nagging doubts are silenced," he added. And

Gord had to admit that that was true.

After peering closely at his and Gord's neck-chains, Gellor remarked that they were of good craftsmanship, with nothing noteworthy save that the gemstones set in his own were not of the highest quality—Count Blemu had not given as great a bribe as it first seemed.

Their gift blades were then laid out for inspection through the strange and enchanted ocular. Gord watched in fascination as Gellor went through his routine of perusal, first looking from a distance, then at each weapon separately. He informed his young friend that there were strange runes graven on the blade of the shortsword, and then after his minute inspection was over Gellor put both blades aside and in a moment was the Gellor of old, eye patch and grin included, relaxing and further explaining what he had discovered.

"Well, Gord," he began, "I am surprised at these swords. Magicked weapons are not exactly uncommon, but…" He allowed the rest of this statement to drift off as he considered possible implications. He picked up the scabbard containing the weapon Gord had been given and asked, "Did the constable tell you anything about your blade?"

"He claimed it to be a specially forged alloy of steel and adamantite, difficult to break or dull, which would pierce dragon hide or armor. I think that was the whole of it."

"It is that indeed," Gellor confirmed. "Enchantments have been laid upon it to cause it to strike true and bite deep. It seems to have been made for elvenkind and sheds no glow of dweomer when employed, though the glyphs state that you may have its power to see your foes clearly," and with that Gellor tossed the scabbarded weapon to Gord.

"Perhaps you'll be able to determine what those signs and sigils portend when the sunlight is bright enough for you to detect them," he continued. "I could not make them out exactly, and the powers of the blade are unknown to me. I am puzzled where the count got it—and why he bestowed it upon you, for it seems to be a very special weapon."

"Probably he failed to recognize it as anything more than a small sword with some minor magics placed upon it," speculated Gord.

"He and his court enchanter both? That is possible, I suppose… and it is well known that Dunstan himself greatly prefers the broadsword."

Gord snapped his fingers as his memory sharpened. "Sir Mellard mentioned that the blade was taken from some adversary in the fighting on

the northern border," he told Gellor.

"Interesting, but it tells us nothing but that some mercenary, bandit, or humanoid scum picked it from a corpse elsewhere," Gellor commented.

"What of the sword given you, Gellor?" inquired Gord as he put aside his weapon for further study next day.

"In a bit," said Gellor through a yawn. "Using that eye for such intense work wearies me. Stand the first watch, captain, while your general dozes." Several minutes later, after Gellor had settled himself for rest, he spoke again briefly.

"My weapon is another odd one, my friend, and I am uncertain as to the details of its power and purpose, just as I know not all about the one you have there. One thing I discern is that it claims to be invisible, when used, to all save its wielder… but let us discover the truth of that claim on the morrow," he concluded sleepily. Almost immediately thereafter, Gellor began snoring. Gord strapped on his new sword, more from pride than the suspicion that he would need it, and began his sentry duty.

They had made no fire, as they sought to attract no attention to themselves. Gord moved silently away from the small hollow and began his vigil, occasionally moving his position, for drowsiness crept upon him if he stayed still too long, and always remaining quiet and shadow-wrapped.

Perhaps he did doze for a moment—for the next thing he knew, his sword slapped into his hand, unbidden! Gord's eyes flew open and met the unwinking gaze of a pair of feral yellow ones watching him from not thirty feet distant.

Oddly, the night seemed to have changed, for Gord could see the terrain in starker relief than he had ever experienced before. In fact, Gord noted that the lupine form from which the yellow glare emanated was brighter than the bush under which it crouched, watching him. It suddenly came upon Gord that his vision now detected heat just as if it were light. That was the seeing of many sorts of demi-humans, and he now had this ability! The sword he grasped in readiness was the answer, of course.

The wolflike creature began to creep ahead almost imperceptibly, and at this Gord quickly drew his long dagger with his left hand. The young man's rapid unsheathing of that weapon and his tense crouch caused the watcher to flatten its partially raised form and shift itself backward. There was virtually no sound, and the beast seemed to believe itself hidden from

Gord's sight. As it was, Gord could see what happened next even though the tall grass and brush obscured much of his new visual ability.

After withdrawing to a position behind the bush, the creature stood on its hind legs—and its form shifted, rapidly changing into that of a female, with short hair, unclad as far as Gord could tell from where he crouched. Just as Gord was about to slip forward and investigate this weird phenomenon, the female-like creature broke into a soft, lilting song. The low, sweet strains of this melody stole over Gord and prevented his moving.

No, not prevented, he thought, analyzing his changed purpose; the song simply made him wish to stay still so he could listen without anything interfering with his concentration. It was a most wonderful air. He could not quite understand its words, but they promised gentle love and contentment. If he could listen but a little longer, Gord knew that he would understand the lyrics and gain something he had truly desired all his life.

The singing grew no louder, but the naked singer came slowly toward him, moving silently, smiling, and now crooning to him with a voice that promised paradise. This approach caused the sword he had allowed to droop to suddenly rise without any desire on Gord's part. The blade leapt upward, tip pointing toward the naked breast advancing upon it, the handle sending unpleasant burning through Gord's hand and along the very nerves of his arm. He tried to drop the weapon, but instead of relaxing their hold, his disobedient fingers grasped it tighter, and the tingling became a sharp pain.

Gord shook his head to clear the sudden onrush of the sensation upon his brain, and as he did so, the sound of the singing changed. He no longer felt lulled by it, his body was not relaxed and heavy, and his mind no longer found unguessed meanings and total joy in the melody. Gord again moved into a crouch, weapon on guard before him.

The naked singer ceased the melody at this, seeing that it was not having the desired effect. She was just beyond the reach of his sword's thrust, and Gord could see her visage clearly. It was wild-looking and beautiful, but as he looked upon it, her lips drew back into a grimace of hatred and ferocity, and small, sharp teeth were revealed by this snarl. She sprang at Gord, changing into lupine form even as her body launched itself toward him. The sword's blade was suddenly limned with a faint silvery gleam, and Gord caught the leaping form upon the weapon's point, using it to both wound and deflect the rush of the attacker. The creature, now a huge wolf, howled

with terrible pain, rolled several times after striking the ground beside Gord, and then dashed away uttering mournful yowls.

Gellor was next to him within seconds after this last had happened, his own longsword unsheathed, but the naked steel was unnecessary. The wolfwere, as Gellor called it, was certainly not likely to return this night. Nevertheless, the older man took guard duty thereafter, his magicked ocular back in place, while Gord slept an uneasy sleep.

Chapter 24

The stone halls and burrows of the Gnomeking's domain gave Gord a touch of claustrophobia—but not because they were barely tall enough for him to walk through; indeed, some of the chambers were quite large. Rather, the surrounding rock reminded him too much of his former prison in Blemu's deep dungeon, and also of his flight with Evaleigh through the warren of passages beneath the palace at Stoink.

The little, gnarly demi-humans were friendly enough, and even kind to him. The Gnomeking, Warren apHiller, gave the two humans not only an audience, but a banquet. It was obvious that he knew Gellor from times past, and the king and the one-eyed man soon closeted themselves, covering in private (as Gellor later told Gord) the affairs that were to be relayed to Rel Mord.

Despite the friendliness of the gnomes, Gord was pleased when his friend told him that they would stay no longer than the three days that courtesy demanded, and thereafter they would move on. The grottoes and giant badgers of the gnome kingdom were interesting but for a short time. Even more intriguing to Gord were the gems displayed by these folk, but as a guest he could not ply his professional skills to acquire any of the valuables. Yes, three days was quite enough time to spend with the gnomes.

Instead of heading westward toward Rel Mord when they departed, Gellor said they must go south to the area of Innspa first. Rel Mord could wait, for according to the Gnomeking there was something brewing in the vast reaches of the Adri Forest that needed looking into. The prospect of action excited Gord, and he cheerfully agreed to accompany his friend on this mission, volunteering to do whatever he could to aid Gellor.

They rode through the hills, making excellent time with help from gnomes and hillmen they encountered, coupled with Gellor's knowledge of the area. Gord was quite surprised to see several large contingents of armed gnomes, as well as some hillmen warbands, marching northward. Gellor told him that Gnomeking Warren had sent out a call the very day the two of them had arrived, and the forces he was gathering would join the troops Nyrond had sent into the Blemu Hills. The ruler of the gnomes of the Flinty Hills desired to reestablish his kinsmen in the Blemus once again, while avenging the slaughter of those clans of the small demi-humans who had dwelt there before the hordes of orcs, gnolls, and others overran the hills. The tough warbands of hillmen would return home after lending their aid,

but most of the gnomes would resettle in the northern uplands verged by the Teesar.

With such armed might aswarm, the Flinty Hills were a safe place to be in, for no hostile humanoids or monsters dared to show themselves while soldiers marched everywhere within these tors and vales. In a couple of days the two adventurers descended from the mounds of the Flinties and took a road that ran parallel to the highlands. This was the very route that Gord had decided would not carry him and Evaleigh toward Knurl, and he was gratified to find out now that his decision about the road had been correct. Now he and Gellor followed its course to Innspa some fifty leagues distant.

As befitted the second part of its name, the town was a place of bubbling springs—some cold, some hot, and many of both oddly colored or imbued with strange odors. While a few of these were open and common, most were contained within some edifice or another. Besides these baths and centers that promised various sorts of invigoration, cures, and whatnot, the walled place had more hostels, taverns, and inns than any community Gord had ever experienced—hence the first part of its name. The place also boasted more than a half-hundred religious buildings, ranging from small shrines to large temples and great cathedrals.

Although Gord found one or two of the many sorts of waters offered for drinking to be flavorful or refreshing, he had no interest in mineral-bath immersions, geysering showers, steaming, coating with mud, or any other such activities; and his experience with clericism, such as it was, made him shun the places of devotion and worship. All in all, he was very anxious to move on, just as he had been when with the gnomes a fortnight before.

Fortunately for Gord, Innspa was located just within the edge of the westernmost fringe of the Adri; they were so close to their destination that he suspected they would push on soon. Gellor had a few calls to make in the town and some information to gather, but after a day to rest their coursers and allow them the luxury of stall and grain, the two were pushing into the depths of the timberland.

The trees grew thickly over the last folds of the Flinties here, but his companion told Gord that soon the forest floor would become level. "Soon" turned out to be nearly three days, but then the terrain proved to be as promised. In the heart of the woodland, the trees were all towering giants. Interlaced branches far above their heads and dead leaves under their feet

made travel easy, since little underbrush could grow under such conditions. Gellor spent quite a bit of time pointing out different types of trees and animal signs to the city-bred young thief. Gord knew most of the common trees—oak, maple, ipp, and chestnut, for instance. Hornwood and ash were not so familiar to him, and the roan woods and great yews amazed him. He had heard of the yarpick tree but never seen one, and its long and deadly thorns likewise fascinated him when the two wayfarers came across such a tree growing at the verge of a rocky meadow within the forest.

Gord was also treated to his first sight of the gigantically antlered deer that roamed the Adri. He and Gellor remained still when they encountered a herd of about a dozen such animals, and the beasts neither charged nor immediately fled. After the herd did bound away, Gellor said that the game within the woodland was plentiful—all sorts of bears, wild boars and sows, elk, deer, wolves, lions and smaller cats too, aurochs and herds of wild cattle, plus the usual variety of smaller sorts of game.

Although the woodsfolk who lived within the Adri Forest hunted frequently and with much success, they never took more than they needed. Further, Gellor explained, their foresting of certain of the trees was done to provide grassy clearings for grazing and allow new growth as well. This seemed a quite intelligent and civilized way of life to the young thief—but this knowledge in no way prepared him for his first meeting with the forest-dwellers, which came almost immediately thereafter.

They rode past a meadow and along a game trail that wound eastward. At a widening of this path, an arrow suddenly thunked into the bole of a tree beside Gellor, and within seconds men clad in brown and green appeared among the trees all around them. Gord reached instinctively for his sword, but his friend stayed his hand with a gesture just as one of the tall woodsmen stepped forward from the foliage and spoke.

"Gellor, you old bastard! That shaft came near to skewering your nose, and you never flinched!" he shouted.

"I trust your aim too well for flinching, Stalker, but you must be getting old, too. I saw you at least two seconds before you loosed that arrow!"

"What brings you to our fair forest, you miserable minion of the mighty? Hear that there was a hot young dryad new to this place?"

"Hell, no—I wanted to see if you were really as ugly as I remembered you to be!" the grinning, one-eyed man retorted.

"Then climb down off that nag and take a look with that one peeper you still got, 'cause when I get through with you, it'll be swollen shut but good."

As Gellor dismounted, Gord did the same, uncertain just what was going to happen. All that took place was a spirited round of hand-clasping and back-thumping between Gellor and the one called Stalker, intermingled with more bad jokes and insults. Then Gord was introduced to the dozen woodsmen headed by Stalker, who all received him warmly. They reminded Gord of the hillfolk that he and Gellor had encountered earlier on their journey—but, to Gord's mild amazement, these men were even bigger.

One huge fellow named Chert took an instant liking to the small thief and soon was telling him all about the forest, its folk, and the community. Chert said he was not originally from this portion of the forest, having been born and raised by the hill foresters not distant, but he came to like the more civilized amenities offered in this neck of the woods and had joined up with Stalker's boys. This information made Gord wonder what the hill foresters were like, for a rougher and tougher lot than these woodsmen he could not imagine.

Towering at least two inches above any of the other tall woodsmen, Chert was indeed a sight to behold. His huge shoulders and brawny chest tapered to a still-massive waist, which looked less substantial than it actually was only because its girth was small in relation to his great torso. His upper body was held up by two legs corded with muscles and as large as tree trunks, while his mighty arms exuded the strength that had come from wielding axe and bow since childhood. Chert seemed to be totally unaware of his own stature and power, and Gord thought of him as a massive bear cub who had unknowingly grown into adulthood. A great paw clapped Gord on his shoulder, and a broad, handsome face topped by a tangled heap of curly, brown hair smiled openly down at him.

"Come on," said the giant. "Stay in my hut while you're in town. Your pal Gellor will be batting the breeze with Stalker and Ned Horn all night."

Gord wondered where "town" was, for all he saw was a closely grouped bunch of thirty or forty rude log huts, so positioned and surrounded by growth as to make the cluster of small houses invisible from a hundred yards away. Chert's own dwelling was built utilizing a partially fallen tree as the roofbeam. The hut was roomier inside than it appeared to be from without, and although it was messy, the place was comfortable enough.

His host casually dropped his huge longbow and quiver of arrows near the door, flipped his axe so that it buried itself in a log on the far wall, divested himself of his thick leather jerkin, and sprawled down on the heap of skins that served as his bed, telling Gord to round up whatever stray hides and pelts he could find—and there were plenty to be had—and relax too.

"I've got some good ale there," Chert said, indicating a small barrel near his feet, "and drinking horns are everywhere. Just find one someplace, shake out whatever's in it, and help yourself. I want you to tell me what the rest of the country is like."

Gord couldn't help but like this big barbarian, yokel though he was. His quaint speech and unusual mannerisms were unaffected and honest. These virtues disarmed Gord by easy stages, being unaccustomed as he was to meeting folk who displayed such straightforward characteristics. So the young thief soon found himself talking about Greyhawk City, Urnst, his foray into the Theocracy, and so on. Between frequent interruptions for a question or some homely comparison to Chert's own limited scope of adventurous trekking, Gord managed to reveal a fair amount of what he had seen and done during his life. In turn, he discovered that although rustic, the steely-eyed barbarian was no savage, but rather a bold and knowledgeable adventurer in his own realm of woodlands and wilds.

Their conversation was cut short by one of the men from the forest thorp, calling them both to come to the council clearing. Chert jumped up, pulled on his leather jerkin, yanked his axe loose from its resting place, and tucked the weapon into his belt. When Gord asked his young host why he was donning armor and weapons for a meeting, Chert simply told him that everyone did so at such gatherings. So Gord buckled on his own sword just as another head poked into the hut.

"Hey, Chert, let's go! I'll walk with you," the newcomer said. Then he smiled at Gord and introduced himself. "You must be Gellor's friend, Gord. I'm Greenleaf—your servant, sir." He smiled more broadly as he added, "Friends call me Curley," while he passed a hand over his bald pate.

"Sure, Curley," the barbarian woodsman boomed in reply. "Let's all three go together. Gord's all set, and I'll just get my spear, and we can get moving."

The gathering place was about half a mile from the camp. As they walked, Curley told the two younger men that there was serious trouble

brewing, but he wouldn't say any more, because it was Stalker, as leader of the community, who had the privilege and duty to bring such things before the people.

Gord liked Curley right away, although he was quite an unusual character. There was no question he was of mixed parentage; his pointed ears and bright green eyes made his elven ancestry obvious. His human heritage was evidenced by his hairless head, broad shoulders, and somewhat rotund build, plus his height of nearly six feet. Although the fellow appeared small next to the towering Chert, he was still bigger than Gord—who was, actually, about the same height as a mature male elf.

Around Curley's neck was a gold chain from which hung a golden sun with an enameled tree upon it. When Curley noticed Gord's curiosity about it, the fellow explained that the necklace was his devotional symbol—the sun and the Tree of Life, as he called it, being representations of Nature.

"We're druidical folk here, you know, and I am presently serving as the spiritual counselor for this little community," he told Gord earnestly.

"And what of the little gold leaves forming the chain?" inquired Gord. "I see some are enameled green, while others are not."

The druid said that this was just his particular preference, but Chert interjected that it was because he was proud of being a member of the Eighth Circle—whatever that was—and if Gord could count that high, he'd find that four leaves on each side of the symbol had been colored green. Thus, eight curled green leaves-—denoting the druid's rank, and his name too.

"He's a show-off, but not a bad guy," Chert concluded, throwing a smirk in Curley's direction.

They came to a place in the forest where the surrounding hills formed a small, natural amphitheater. About fifty armed men were present, plus roughly the same number of women, most of them also bearing weapons, and many more children. The assemblage was quiet, and even the youngsters seemed dignified and reserved. As Gord watched, several more family groups and a few lone men drifted in from the trees that ringed the hilltops and moved to places where they sat or stood while exchanging low greetings with those around them.

Curley Greenleaf took his leave of Gord and Chert and headed for a cleared place at the bottom of the bowl-shaped dell where both Stalker and Gellor already stood. In a moment these two were joined by the druid and a

tall, handsome woman, clad in a dark green robe, who appeared to be in her mid-thirties. Gord asked Chert who she was, and the barbarian replied that she was some sort of spell-binder or something, and he didn't trust her much.

After looking slowly around the circumference of the dale, the leader of the community began speaking. Stalker's deep voice carried well, even though he was not shouting; the place was formed such that even those near the top of the low hillsides could hear him clearly. He simply announced that the gathering was summoned so that all could hear the message of Gellor, whom he referred to as an old and trusted friend of the folk who dwelled in Adri Forest. Stalker affirmed, for the sake of those who did not know Gellor, that they could rely upon him for candor and truth.

"Free folk of Adri are not much concerned with the affairs of kings and princes—this I know," began Gellor. "Aerdy or Nyrond are not masters you wish to serve. Neither is desirable, so you pit one against the other and thus remain free of both, as well Rel Mord and Rauxes understand. There is a difference between the two thrones, though, and you are as able as I to state it. Nyrond and her allies think that their rule would be just and fair, while the Overking of Aerdy cares nothing for such ethical considerations, desiring only tyrannical power."

There were a few murmurs from the listeners. Several called out agreement, but noted that even a well-meaning oppressor is still nothing more than a despot.

"Do not mistake my purpose!" Gellor cried in reply. "I am not here to apologize for any crown, nor to urge acceptance of any yoke. You are woodsmen, and you bend your knee to no monarch. I serve many crowns, but I also desire nothing less than the right of liberty, which you now hold, and your continued freedom. That is why I stand before you now. Life and liberty are threatened, and it is my duty to give warning. This is a grave matter, and you must decide what course you will follow," Gellor said somberly.

"The facts are these: What was mistaken for merely an ambitious scheme to create a petty new kingdom to the north is actually a machination of Ivid." At the mention of the Over-king's name, several of the audience spat. The one-eyed speaker went on without comment.

"My own initial assessment of the situation was mistaken, and I have been party to this, unwittingly, until now. A Nyrondel army, with many

auxiliary forces, is even now assembling to meet in the Blemu Hills. King Archbold himself will lead the force, and its purpose is to finish the destruction of the humanoid state that has ensconced itself in Bone March, secure the new fief for Nyrond, and establish a strong frontier between that state and the advancing Ratikkans.

"Such in itself is of little interest to the free folk of Adri," Gellor continued as more scattered mutterings arose from the crowd. "But there is more to the story than first seems."

"The force in the Blemu Hills now gives the Overking a target. If he can defeat the Nyrondel host there, Aerdy would regain the whole of her lost northern frontier, from the Flinty Hills to the mountains that guard Ratik's southern border. Worse still, if the advancing Nyrondel army is caught in a cauldron between the Harp River and the Teesar Torrent, with Aerdian forces to the south and east and savage tribes of humanoids to the north, then Archbold is between mountain and murder. He and a few could certainly make good an escape, but the rest would die by the thousands, unable to retreat and opposed by overwhelming numbers of foemen.

"Oh, the battle would be bloody on both sides, and the cost to the Malachite Throne high, but what cares the Overking for soldiers? The slaughter of the Nyrondel army and its allied divisions would cripple the capacity of Archbold, even with help from the Prelacy of Almor, to defend his eastern borders. The Overking's frontier would leap westward in a rush, and all of Adri Forest would be within the Great Kingdom once again! Ivid's heavy hand would grasp the lands from the Flinty Hills to that branch of the Harp River known as the Lyre. Perhaps Chathold would even fall, perhaps not, but Almor would be hard pressed to retain its lands east of the Harp."

As Gellor paused briefly to let this sink in, some of those assembled voiced their concern with shouts of "How could all of this happen?" and "What would you have us do?" and similar remarks. When the speaker resumed, he did so by responding to the crowd.

"How came this to pass is unimportant," Gellor admonished, "for you and I can only speculate fruitlessly. What is happening is that even as we speak, the might of the Great Kingdom is moving toward the goal I have just told you of. One of its armies musters in distant Jalpa, and another in Prymp. Neither is likely to move immediately, but they will be held, waiting victory

in the north, and then Herzog Chelor's host will join that of Ivid to attack Almor.

"Closer to home, the Overking's own guards, with many others too, have left Edgefield and are within the northern expanse of this great forest." Here Gellor was forced to pause a full minute while the audience vented its surprise and anger at this revelation.

"That horde is led by renegade woodsmen and forest bandits, who will guide the army swiftly to Woodford. It appears that its objective is to storm Knurl from the west, thus placing itself as an axe across the artery of Archbold's line of communication and supply. Meanwhile, the supposedly beaten forces of North Province, commanded by the jackal Grenell, have marched from Eastfair. This troop reportedly is bolstered with many mercenary men-at-arms and is picking up contingents of humanoids as it goes. Either at Flosh Crossing or Ongleford, the force will come across Teesar Torrent, thus closing the jaws of the trap upon Archbold."

"And what can a handful of fighters do about all that?" demanded a bearded fellow at the front of the ringing circle of woodsfolk.

"We are few," Stalker called back in reply. "The folk are many, however. If we send runners and Sperling here puts out her messages, and we thus gather ourselves, we too become an army."

"Why should we take arms against the stinking Aerdians to rescue the swine of Nyrond?" came the rejoinder from the bearded man. "It seems we benefit when such scoundrels as these fight each other. The dogs commanded by Ivid dare not come far within these leafy precincts to carry his writ."

At this, Curley Greenleaf stepped forward. "They do indeed dare entry into our forest," he said firmly. "I know this, for my brothers and sisters of our Order have brought me word of this boldness. And because of it, we druids have decided to take the side of Nyrond. The advancing army has been wicked. All woodsfolk captured have been put to the sword. The sacred groves have been laid low," the druid said with clear hatred in his voice.

"The evil force moves swiftly and attempts secrecy, but they cannot hem in all of us—some folk manage to avoid the swarming scouts who go before the horde, and druids have other means of foiling capture. What is dared now will be repeated again and again—unless these trespassers are given a lesson in manners," Curley concluded.

Those remarks were greeted by general agreement and some cheering from the gathering. The brief debate ended, and the topic became how best to put a plan into action. Eventually the woodsfolk agreed that a handful of the swiftest runners would carry word to the surrounding areas, and the forces of the area would meet at Oddgrave Hill, the place that Curley Greenleaf said was serving as the focal point for all of the woodsfolk willing to bear arms against the marauding army. Then the assembled folk quickly dispersed, each going off to ready his affairs for whatever part each chose in the coming days.

Gellor pulled Gord aside and inquired what the young man planned to do. Gord said he had not thought much about it, but it was likely that he'd join with the woodsmen if they had no objection. A fight such as this promised to be was something he had never experienced, and who could tell what would come out of it? His friend nodded in pleasure at Gord's decision, wished him well, and told Gord that he hoped to see him again when the bands gathered at Oddgrave Hill for the march to Woodford. Gellor would be briefly occupied by certain things that needed his personal attention, but he said that he would be at the great gathering place before the warbands marched.

It required the rest of that day and all of the next for the members of Stalker's community to prepare for their journey and to wait for the return of the messengers who had gone out.

Gord busied himself by procuring a piece of tough but supple leather and using his dagger to cut and shape it into a sling, which he thought would be handy in the days to come. Then he searched out a good pouchful of properly sized stones, practiced for a while, and felt satisfied that his sling would be a good addition to the woodsfolk's large and varied collection of missile weapons.

Counting a scattering of fighters who came from isolated dwellings nearby, the group that had assembled by nightfall of the second day numbered two score, about a third of whom were women. Most carried longbows and short, broad-bladed spears in addition to axes of all sorts, and a very few carried swords at their belts. Most of the women were clad in leathern coats and carried bows only slightly smaller than those of the men. These latter folk were more heavily protected, generally wearing shirts of scale or chain mail under their rough brown and green clothing.

Chert had given his new companion a cloak of olive hue to wear over his black garments, and it was such a great expanse of cloth that Gord had to slice off a broad strip from its hem so that it would not drag on the ground behind him like some cleric's long ceremonial train. A friendly neighbor gladly plied her needle to make a new hem, and the cut-off strip became a tabard to cover the polished black cuirass of hard leather Gord wore. Save for his black boots and his lack of a bow, he might have been one of the lads from the forest, bent on joining the impending fray.

Next morning, as soon as it was light enough to see, the warband led by Stalker went forth, following forest path and game trail in a northeasterly direction, heading for the rendezvous at Oddgrave Hill. Curley Greenleaf was with the company, and rather than take a position of status at the head of the column, he strode merrily along with Gord and Chert near the rear, telling stories, uttering bad jokes and worse puns, and generally making the march seem shorter and easier by his presence.

Gord asked Curley numerous questions about druids and the druidical belief, and the bald fellow was only too pleased to reply at length to such inquiries. Chert grumbled that he cared nothing about such stuff, but he listened all the same and occasionally chimed in himself on one point or another. They covered some thirty miles thus, and picked up another ten fighters along the route, so when evening camp was made, the warband numbered over fifty.

Stalker spoke to the warriors that night, giving them advice on how the enemy was likely to react and fight. The arrows of the woodsfolk must be made to tell, for at close quarters the well-armored Aerdians were certainly likely to give far better than they got. The warband leader then divided his company into five sub-bands. Each of these squads had its own leader who would take instructions from Stalker and see that the fighters in his or her group did precisely what they were told.

Both Gord and Chert were assigned to a woman called Wren, who was nothing like her name, being nearly as tall as Chert and hefting a bardiche heavier than the brawny barbarian's own great axe. As the two young men were eating their portions of the half-raw, greasy meat provided by a hungry bear that had ventured close to the humans, thinking to find its own dinner, their newly assigned commander came over and joined them. Wren gnawed on a piece of meat, eyed them critically, and addressed Chert first.

"You I know about, big boy," she said disdainfully but in a jesting tone. "Stay back and don't go rushing out until I give you a whistle! Now, what about shorty here? He hasn't got a bow, and he's too small to go hand-to-hand with those beefy soldiers the Overking favors…. Can he tend wounded?"

This irritated the young thief, so he snapped off a response before the barbarian could swallow the hunk of tough meat he was chewing on and reply to the query, which was actually directed at Chert.

"The name is Gord," he said angrily. "I answer all questions about myself, and I fight well enough for any to fear—beefy soldier and beefy woodsman alike!"

As soon as he'd said that last statement, Gord regretted his words. What he had said was insulting and unfair—and it was foolish to pick a quarrel with one's swordmate. Besides, while she was large indeed, the proportions displayed by Wren were by no means beefy. Voluptuous, yes, but not beefy. The woman took no offense; in fact, her reaction was quite the opposite of what Gord had expected to hear.

"Gord it is," she said, buffeting him on the back in comradely fashion. "If you fight as tough as you talk, then I'll be glad to have you by my side."

Gord drew forth his sling, displaying the thonged leather pouch to both Wren and Chert. "This bit of hide can send stony kisses to enemies just as your bows send their shafts," he said, "although I admit that amidst these trunks it is a more difficult task. I also ply shortsword and dagger with sufficient skill to have brought ruin to one or two foemen. Trust me to fight alongside my fellows as long as there is cause to do so."

Wren sat with them and proceeded to finish her meal in their company. The three talked, and it soon became obvious to Gord that her purpose was to seek out Chert, not to speak of the coming battle or give instructions. The muscular giant was friendly and talkative in return, but he made no response to the overtures Wren offered, and when she said she thought a walk in the forest would help her to loosen tired muscles and cause sounder sleep, Chert cheerfully wished the brown-haired and buxom warrior an enjoyable stroll and a good slumber. Her hazel eyes snapping, Wren left with a curt nod, her long braids bouncing.

"Are you blind, man?!" Gord hissed at his companion. "That woman is terrific, and she was almost begging you to go off into the woods for some loving!" Chert shrugged, and Gord grew suddenly suspicious. "You're

not…?" He let the thought trail off, reluctant to finish it and sorry that he had brought up the subject.

"No!" Chert asserted hotly, fully aware of what Gord had been getting at. "It's just that I only like women with golden tresses and eyes of azure…. Some time I'll tell you about a dark-haired wench who nearly sundered my heart, but not now. The time has come to flush talk of females and get some shuteye."

Gord was tired from the hard and fast trek, so he readily agreed. Both men slept soundly until morning, ate the meager ration allotted to them, and were once again striding along toward the gathering place at Oddgrave Hill. That day and the next were pretty much the same, and Gord grew used to the marching, so he was less irritable and more lively when dusk fell. Chert and Wren had resumed an easy, bantering relationship the day after he had spurned her advances. Chert himself had broken the standoff by pinching the woman and making a suggestive comment. Soon she was as friendly and cheerful as before, and the barbarian giant was now almost pursuing rather than being pursued.

Gord thought that perhaps Chert was both a bit shy with women and not very experienced with their ways, so that instead of being unresponsive to Wren's offer of favors, the fellow had simply not understood the intent. Well, it was too late now, for the next day they would be at the great gathering and then off to Woodford, he supposed, to confront the advancing horde.

By the time Gord and his companions arrived at Oddgrave Hill, several thousand of the free woodsfolk were gathered there, all armed and preparing for the battle. Stalker's war-band became a part of a brigade numbering nearly a thousand. This force was to be a flank company with some special mission that would stay undisclosed until the whole army was in position.

More groups came in on the same day that Stalker's did, and at the leaders' council held that night it was decided to wait no longer for any others who might be on their way. The army of woodsmen now totaled about six thousand in all, and no more than a few hundred additional fighters could be expected. The time was at hand to march the ten remaining leagues between them and the crossing of the Harp, so that the

invading army sent by Overking Ivid of Aerdy would have to fight both river and woodsfolk in order to succeed.

Chapter 25

The broad waters of the Harp River at Woodford were wide and rippling between tree-lined banks. Save for a deeper channel near the western shore, the depth was nowhere above the knees. At the one deeper place, a stretch of perhaps fifteen yards in width, the waters had managed to dig a place nearly waist-deep, but solid granite bedrock had resisted erosion beyond this, and man, animal, or even cart could ford the river here without difficulty or danger of drowning. A narrow road, one of only a very few indeed within the Adri Forest, led to the shallow place and away from the other side of the river. This set of pleasant circumstances had led to many groups using this ford—the latest of which was to be the army of Overking Ivid, which was advancing toward the river from the east.

The Overking's force was an impressive one. Ahead of the formations went a swarm of light troops, some afoot and some horsed, to scout and make certain that no men encountered could carry news of the army's coming to its enemies. These scouts were evil woodsmen, bandits, and the worst of the mercenary companies, and they were like a small army themselves, for they numbered well over a thousand, with a main body of light cavalry ready to charge into battle or carry news swiftly to the horde behind.

Normally, these advance troops were anywhere from half a mile to two miles ahead of the slow-moving army behind. The roadway allowed them to move faster than usual, however, and they were now easily two leagues in advance of their fellows. The advance group's commander, General Lomor, the Margrave of Uskedge, drove this swarm of murderers and looters far ahead today because he feared that there would be a hostile force barring the ford. Also, for this same reason, he had with him several companies of light mercenary infantry plus a squadron of the Overking's personal armored lancers. With these reinforcements he felt he could brush aside any resistance and hold the crossing until the bulk of the army came up-General Lomor was pleased to find the place tranquil on the morning he arrived. Several hundred scouts had splashed through the cold water and combed the west bank, sending back word that no sign of an enemy could be found. Now his whole force was past the dangerous ford, while a courier group hastened back to give this happy intelligence to Grand Marshal Dreek.

The Aerdian general was just giving orders to send a small company of mercenary horse and foot farther ahead, while the main body of the advance

waited for word from the rear, when a storm of arrows rained upon the troops. The broadheaded shafts bit through armor, killing men and horses as if a giant scythe had passed through the force. Even as the first shouts and screams were being voiced, a second volley of missiles struck, and then a third.

The general, being not a complete fool, understood immediately that a horseshoe-shaped ambush had been laid on this western side of the river, and his soldiers were caught between the offensive and the waters they had just forded. He turned and rode off immediately, his bright gold and red banner bearing the arms of Uskedge signaling the route of the retreat, even as his herald sounded the fact on his horn. The general made good his flight, but no more than a few notes came from the herald's trumpet before a half-dozen long arrows silenced its owner forever.

Half of the advance force of the Aerdian army escaped the ambush. These survivors were mostly mounted, of course, their horses enabling them to flee the onrush of men that followed the initial arrow storm. General Lomor was at midstream on his way back across the river when the fullness of his disaster came upon him. More cloth yard shafts flew from the supposedly safe bank to the east. His accompanying clerics, and the magic-user near them, began to prepare their spells but, exposed as they were in the middle of the river, none managed anything significant. The Margrave attempted to rally his remaining troops and make a stand where they were, while the spell-binders sheltered behind shields and men to work their desperately needed assistance.

Suddenly, a cloud of biting and stinging insects buzzed around the trapped force. There was a confused scramble among men and mounts, all trying to escape the plague of pests, while still more arrows sped into the cluster of invaders with a sound similar to the hornets that were stinging them with less deadly effect.

The sole surviving magic-user, a warlock calling himself Comet, managed to dispel the magically created insect swarm, but then the enemies from both sides of the river closed on the trapped remnants of the Aerdian advance force. General Lomor threw down his sword and cried for quarter, but no prisoners were being taken. His body fell into the water moments later, across that of his warlock, and the fight was over. Not one of the invaders remained alive, and none had succeeded in breaking through the ambush to get back and warn their fellows.

An hour passed before the lead elements of the Aerdian main battle, as the central division of the army was called, arrived at Woodford. The place was quiet, the waters were still, and no trace of fighting was apparent. The troop of light horse saw a strong body of mercenary infantry spread about on the opposite shore, evidently on guard against any possible foe, but obviously relaxed and awaiting the arrival of the Grand Marshal's army so they could push forward again to scout. Just visible on the road in the distance was the banner of General Lomor, the ensign surrounded by a small body of cavalry, moving westward away from the river.

Another small body of mounted men appeared from the trees along the east bank and waved to their fellows on the opposite side of the Harp River, signaling that all was well. The cavalry troop came across the ford first, keeping their horses at a slow but steady walk. The head of the Marshal's long column of soldiers was marching swiftly toward the crossing place, and the horsemen wished to get clear of the ford before the soldiers arrived. There was no love lost between the cavalry, who were mercenaries, and the oncoming imperial and noble contingents.

The blue and gold tabards of the Overking's Guard proclaimed the coming of the army. Although the noon sun was now being obscured by slowly thickening clouds, the crowned sun on each tabard's deep blue field seemed to glitter without the aid of beams from the real one above. The leading regiment was of archers, a thousand strong, shortbows slung, short spears shouldered for the march. Behind them came a like regiment of crossbowmen equipped with great arbalests and swords. Together these two units composed the first brigade of heavy foot, for they wore chainmail and stood in close formation.

Behind them came the serried ranks of pole-armed infantry, imperial troops who bore glaive-guisarmes and fauchard-forks. After a suitable interval came the disdainful and haughty riders of Ivid's Own Cavalry—light horsemen with small crossbows, bucklers, and javelins; then mounted sergeants in plate mail with lances, flails, and shields; and finally the so-called Knights of the Malachite Throne, in even heavier armor, bearing an array of heavy swords and axes in addition to lance and shield.

All of these horsemen held their slender javelins and long lances aloft, pennons astream, to proudly proclaim their presence. Although there were but three thousand of them, they considered themselves to be the finest and best soldiers in the army. In truth, these cavalry were indeed terrible foes in

battle, but in a place such as the Adri Forest they were not of much use. They, and the pole-armed phalanxes as well, were much better suited for employment in the open terrain at Knurl and in the Blemu Hills.

At some little distance after the horsemen came a regiment of voulgeers, their long weapons surmounted by cleaverlike steel heads, and also proclaiming their imperial status by their bold colors. Thereafter came the train of artillerists, engineers, and sappers who marched with the baggage and supply.

A small company of mercenary light cavalry served as drab punctuation at the end of the Overking's main battle.

A quarter of a mile farther back, the rear portion of this host was arrayed. This last division was a motley collection, composed of some two thousand infantry belonging to the noble contingents levied at the Overking's behest. These footmen displayed a rainbow of colors and armorial devices, marking which lord they served. Weapons and armor likewise varied as widely, ranging from ranseur and halberd to axe and crossbow. There were relatively few infantry in this unit, compared to the total number of men in the force, because their noble masters deemed such troops to be fit mainly for use as a buffer to absorb missiles and even magical attacks prior to the charge of their more numerous mounted troops.

Farther back, a host of pennants, bannerols, and oddly shaped standards marked the noble lords, knights, and esquires who were riding before an even larger group of their mounted men-at-arms. As varied as the foregoing foot soldiers, this group of cavalry was as numerous as the imperial horsemen—although of questionable merit at times due to lack of discipline, for every baron, plar, count, or whatever felt himself a prince and peer to all the others. Nonetheless, once it was in motion, this mixed brigade was formidable in the extreme.

At a respectful interval came the last elements of the army, a tail of mercenary light horse and skirmish infantry totaling perhaps another thousand, placed to absorb any sudden surprise from the rear. This vast force, strung out for miles, was about to receive a blow upon its head that the body and tail would be able to react to in saurian fashion only.

The foremost riders were well across the ford and amidst their supposed counterparts before a sharp-eyed member of the mercenary troop alerted his fellows that the men around them were not friends. The resulting melee decimated the force and sent the survivors in rout, but served to alert the

archers who were nearly across the river and the crossbowmen just behind, and thus the whole main battle soon knew what was happening. The Battle at Woodford now commenced.

The longbowmen of the woodsfolk were ranged for three hundred yards along the west bank of the river, hidden in the foliage and sheltered by logs and tree trunks. These archers opened a withering discharge upon their enemy counterparts, the devastation of which was only slightly lessened by the targets' armor. Despite losses and disadvantage, the imperial troops held firm, slowly spreading out their formation to present a broad front so they could not be as easily hit, and so as to be able to reply in kind to the hail of arrows, bolts, and sling bullets pouring upon their ranks. They were brave, these men, and half were slain or wounded by the time they were stretched the entire length of the shallows of the Harp and were returning their own missiles in hopes of finding targets clad in colors that blended with the forest.

The disciplined sacrifice of the archers was not in vain, for coming at the double was the narrow column of pole-armed infantry. When their bristling mass of glaives and fauchards crossed the ford and struck into the lightly protected archers on the far shore, the sharp edges and points would pierce the woodsmen's line and spread out along the river edge. Thus the onslaught of flying shafts would be assuaged, and the cruel tormentors plying their deadly bows would be slain.

Although arrows rained in arching fire over the heads of the screening shortbowmen and crossbowmen to fall upon the rushing brigade of infantry, these latter men were more heavily armored, with studded jacks of padded leather over chain-mail, and their front ranks were provided with steel chest plates and greaves as well. A few fell, but most came on unharmed. The screen of bowmen before them parted at their coming, glad at their comrades' ferocity and lusting for the slaughter that their arrival portended.

This parting enabled the woodsmen to increase the effect of their archery upon the infantry, however, and whole ranks of the pole-armed imperials dropped before a new onslaught of arrows. Still, those behind came grimly on, lowering their weapons as they filled the front of the column, stepping over the fallen in their path. Had the water not slowed their advance, far fewer would have been killed, but this was not the case.

Finally, the ford was crossed by the leading men of the column, but their rush fell onto empty ground, for the woodsmen had fallen back before the

imperial charge. A hundred yards away, a company of bowmen continued to stand across the open road, loosing missiles steadily at their foemen, while from the flanking woods came still more shafts.

As the full force of the pole-armed brigade came onto firm ground, its parts were sent left, right, and ahead to clear the trees of snipers. In such conditions, though, shorted axe, morning star, and sword are as good as, or even better than, the long-handled weapons the imperials carried. A raging melee swirled through the trees, as that part of the woodsfolk's contingent without missile weapons no longer had to stand and watch their fellows work. They fell to with joy. At this point, the defending force had suffered losses numbering only a few hundred, while the invading army sent into the Adri by the Overking had lost thousands. The foresters' hearts were singing, and their hopes were high.

After serving as the hard place against which the nut of the vanguard of the imperial army had been wiped out, Gord's unit had recrossed the Harp and rejoined the others. They had not suffered more than a dozen casualties, thanks to Curley Greenleaf's use of spells and their own hard fighting. They were then sent off to a place on the left flank where they were hidden and kept ready to reinforce either those who held the bank before them or the center, where the hardest blow was sure to fall.

From his unit's hiding place, Gord was unable to see any of the initial fighting against the main force, but word came that the hated imperial archers and crossbowmen had been cut down by fully two-thirds, and that the brigade of infantry that followed was being mauled by the savage woodsmen. The sounds of the battle were coming closer.

"I'm ready to trash some of those libertines," Chert said, nervously flipping his great axe.

"Let's have a contest, you and me," said Wren. "The one who knocks over the most of those blue-back sissies gets the other as servant for the evening…."

Their banter was interrupted by the voice of a captain who was calling the group into a rough line. Stalker's band went onto the far right, archers in the front rank and others behind. Both Gord and his hulking friend were thus at the forefront, for Wren was impressed with the aim Gord had displayed while slinging missiles at the Aerdians' hired soldiery hours earlier. Curley Greenleaf was off somewhere else—probably with the commanders of this unit, Gord theorized, for he now realized just how

powerful spell-casters of any nature could be, and druids in particular. He made a mental note to avoid finding out what it was like to be on the wrong end of some hostile spell-binder's pointing finger.

The sounds of fighting were closer than ever now, and whistles alerted the waiting woodsfolk to be ready. Arrows were nocked, and Gord placed one of his stones in his sling. Almost without warning, a knot of men burst into their view—imperial troops with wicked-looking fauchard-forks chivvying several defenders whose shorter weapons were unable to score damage on the advancing men-at-arms.

Gord loosed the stone from his sling just as the first of a cloud of arrows sped into the confident imperials. Gord's eye followed the path of the missile he had released and saw his target go down as the stone struck him full on the temple.

Thrown into disarray by a missile attack they had not anticipated, the remainder of the foot soldiers were easy prey for the men they had been preparing to kill. The captain signaled to the members of Gord's band to move ahead, and they advanced along with similar groups to the right and left, going slowly and using all the cover available. After a few score yards they were halted again, for beyond there was less cover and fewer trees.

In this partial clearing stood hundreds of the Overking's heavy infantry in blue and gold, forming for an attack toward them. Then woodsmen on the imperial force's left flank came howling out of the forest. The disciplined formation turned to face this challenge, only to have its new flank assaulted by missiles from Gord's group and the others on either side. The Overking's men fell back in confusion, heading for the river, but since there were some two hundred bowmen, slingers, and javelineers along their route of retreat, they were soon forced into an obliquing retrograde.

"That's three of those bun-blasting imperials I've nailed so far this round!" shouted Chert from his post at Gord's side.

Wren's voice from the rear called back derisively. "Never mind counting the needlework! Our wager is your axe versus my little chopper here!"

The order came to advance upon the struggling imperials. Gord and his compatriots rushed across the open space and into the trees on the opposite side, in hot pursuit, and soon close work demanded the tossing aside of bows in favor of axe, sword, and like arms. Now the full force of the big woodsfolk was falling on the soldiers of the Overking, and the infantry was being pushed back and crowded into a defensive position at the head of the

ford. Then the imperial horse, having finished their crossing, were amongst their own footmen, and in their desire to strike at the enemy, the cavalry were careless as to who they rode down. By the time they got through the lines of pole-armed soldiers and rode toward their adversaries, it was evident that the infantry brigade would not be fit to contest with another foe for some time to come.

Gord was close enough to the river now to see some of the displays of magic that marked where the spell-casters of the opposing forces were trying to gain an advantage for their own side. A horrible-looking thing, seemingly formed from the very waters of the Harp, rose up suddenly and was rushing toward the rear of the long line of horsemen, but it suddenly seemed to lose speed and sag, then rippled into nothingness. Little darts of glowing coral-color leapt from the far shore to strike and slay any woodsman who showed a target.

A great cloud of ghastly, citrine hue formed in a place above the river where no imperials were fighting, and it quickly traveled westward with a roiling, sickening movement. It touched the tree line, and Gord heard screams and coughing cries. Then it was blown downstream by some gust of wind, and the imperial horse recoiled from its edge.

Then came great claps of thunderous noise, and streaks of lightning and explosive flashes of fire were flying back and forth, slaying friend and foe so indiscriminately that the processes were soon stopped.

The imperial cavalry regrouped and came on again. Then the sky, which had grown darker and cloudier by slow degrees, began to release a cold, fine rain.

"Shit! There goes the bows!" grumbled Chert.

"Now it's time for our contest," laughed Wren in reply to his remark.

"Stay out of the way of those crazy magicians!" was all that Gord could add as he readied for the horsemen to ride them down.

As the lances lowered and destriers began to move forward at a trot, the heavens were torn by jagged strokes of lightning. These bolts streaked down amidst enemy knights and their attendant riders, making metal glow and crackle, bringing down men and steeds in smoking ruins. In reply, a whirlwind suddenly swooped down out of the lowering sky and tore into the ranks of the waiting woodsfolk.

The cavalry charged ahead to escape the crackling electricity, and their adversaries ran to meet them rather than face the roaring destruction of the

tornado that was shredding trees and men alike. Once melee was joined, the dreadful destructions of the deadly dweomers ceased, for bloody work was now the sole purview of fighter and ranger, barbarian and cavalier.

The rain went from drizzle to downpour, augmented by sudden bursts of great, blinding raindrops. These conditions prevented the imperial horsemen from making a slaughter of their unmounted foes. Nevertheless, their lances and great swords took a heavy toll on the brave defenders. Gord fought silently and kept near Chert, who was now nearly berserk, swinging his broad axe with both hands and so powerfully as to sunder steel and flesh in a single stroke. In turn, Chert stayed near the amazonian female who commanded their squad—a unit that now numbered only four.

The ground underfoot became a mire of mud, blood, and bodies. There were screams and howls mixed with banging and clashing, a cacophony that numbed the mind as much as the weapon-work deadened the soul. Gord lost count of how many men he had met. Some were before him one moment, and after stroke and counter were swept away in the press of milling, shouting, struggling humanity. Others remained long enough to thrust or cut and parry until Gord slew them. In the process he had taken many wounds himself, but none were serious. His greatest enemy now was the growing fatigue brought by exertion and tension of battle. How long could this awful melee continue? Until one side or the other was dead, or broke and fled. Either way, he must fight on.

Gord saw that the cavalrymen, most of them dismounted now, were slowly breaking off and falling back, but supporting them were a body of mercenaries and a group of men armed with long voulges. Gord realized that fresh contingents of the Overking's large force had managed to cross the river and take up formation. Through breaks in the crowd of warriors, he could see that beyond these newly arrived soldiers were a great cluster of men still wading the ford. Then the rain sheeted down again, and his vision was obscured. Gord prepared himself for the end, silently cursing himself for ever wishing to have seen a battle between armies.

"Stop gawking at the frigging enemy and get the hell out of here!" Chert shouted in his ear.

Gord started and looked around. The woodsfolk were sprinting westward into the trees, away from the imperial army. There seemed to be a few hundred newly arrived war-band members there, trying to make a rear guard for the exhausted, beaten remnant now in flight from the ford. A few

slingers among these newcomers, augmented by stragglers from the worn groups disengaging from combat, enabled the woodsmen to manage a desultory discharge. Gord was glad he had no missiles left and could pass through this line without feeling cowardly.

In a few minutes the woodsmen were clear of the battle scene, and the rain suddenly stopped. Leaders, chiefs, and captains urged the retreating force to hurry on, away from Woodford and the army that would certainly be in full pursuit. After another hundred yards of retreat Gord understood the reason for this order, for he and his comrades were passing through a formation of carefully concealed sylvan elves, just taking bows from oiled leather cases and setting spears and swords at ready. There would be yet another nasty surprise for the invading horde before this day ended.

Finally, hours later, the scattered remnants of the once-proud assemblage of free forest fighters began rallying in a small valley south of the battle area. Of the thousands who had gone forth, only about half remained. They were all dejected and downcast when Gellor and several other men, accompanied by two women and a slender elf, worked their way through the slumped warriors. Gellor's presence heartened the fighters, and he soon had their attention. Gord, Chert, and Wren moved closer to where he and the group with him stood. Gellor waved, smiled, and spoke.

"What you have done today will go down in the annals of history!" he said warmly. "Don't feel defeated—you have won! Six thousand of you have killed or wounded more than that number of the enemy! You have wiped out the advance division of the Overking's army, mauled his vaunted guardsmen, foot and horse alike, and blunted the edge of Ivid's invasion. You had no choice but to fall back before an army that numbered twice your strength. You took the worst of clerics' and magicians' spells, and held your ground. Only numbers of fresh and heavily armored foes forced you from your slaughter. Now rejoice at this: The Grand Marshal remains in camp at Woodford, afraid to come farther, and he'll soon turn tail and march home to Edgefield. The invasion is over, and you have won the day for us all!"

Chapter 26

Patchwall, the month called Brightleaf by elvenkind, was half gone. The first faint pigments of autumn were beginning to paint the green of Adri's forest giants in gold, scarlet, and russet. It was time to go, and Gord felt a poignancy he had never experienced in similar situations; before now, departure had simply meant he would be placing his boots beneath a new pallet.

Gord tried to identify the reason for his feelings. Did he feel that moving away from this place near the Blemu Hills would finally separate him from Evaleigh? No, that thought was foolish, he decided, for by now she was surely wedded and dwelling far to the north in her new archbaronial state. Then was it because he had grown unusually fond of the woodsfolk? This was quite possible; Gord admired their friendliness, their comradeship, and their fighting skill, and he was still flushed with pride for the small part he had played in the victory at Woodford. One hates to leave the scene of a success, he reasoned, and this last adventure had certainly been a success for him.

Chert felt no such pangs, even though he was leaving the area he knew as home. The big man was whistling merrily as he readied his gear for the journey. But, after all, this was special for him. The giant had never ventured more than a league or two beyond the timberland, and the prospect of a journey into the outside world excited him. Besides, he and Gord were going with Gellor and Curley Greenleaf, bound for the royal court at Rel Mord—great doings indeed!

As Gellor had confidently predicted, the survivors of the Battle at Woodford did indeed hear news that the Grand Marshal of Aerdy had turned his army back toward its starting point, Edgefield—even though the invaders technically had been victorious in the battle. The retreat was an understandable decision; not only was the Overking's host no longer fit to conduct a long campaign, but the Nyrondel force in and around Knurl would most certainly be alerted and on guard against an attempt to advance farther. With two such marks against him, Grand Marshal Dreek had little choice other than to turn back and face the wrath of Ivid.

In a way, Gord felt sorry for the soldiers of the retreating army. Many of the woodsfolk immediately opted to follow the enemy on its long trek eastward to harass its columns and exact further vengeance for the invasion

of their forest. With them went the elves, for they too sought to deliver a lesson to the trespassers that would be long remembered.

Those who remained searched for wounded, cared for their dead, and gathered the spoils of what was a true victory from the field abandoned by the Aerdians. A few prisoners were rounded up from their hiding places in the nearby woods. Renegade woodsmen were given swift justice. Mercenaries were warned and set free, warned to get far away as quickly as they could. A handful of guardsmen, most of whom were Knights of the Malachite Throne, were taken prisoner, and a great debate as to their fate eventually ended in a decision to ransom them, with the money gained thus to be divided among the families of those woodsfolk killed in the fighting.

A week after the great combat, Gord found it difficult to believe such a battle had been fought at the ford. Only the marks of the spells' destructive forces could be seen, and even these were already being covered by the rampant verdure.

The contingent from Stalker's warband was burdened with its share of spoils when it began its march homeward, and it took several days longer to return than the march to the battlefield had required. Even with clerical and druidical healing, wounds were evident and painful. Stalker himself had been so badly hurt that Gord marveled he was able to be up and around in only a few days, let alone able to lead the return of his warband.

But lead he did, and eventually the survivors were safely within the precincts of their community, and life returned to the routine. Save for the trophies displayed on log walls and fireplace stones, and the recounting of deeds told at gatherings, Woodford was again nothing more than a convenient place to cross the Harp River, and hunting, foresting, and mundane concerns of life within the Adri Forest were again paramount.

After making his address to the veterans of the battle, Gellor went on some sort of mission, as was his wont. Gord had now grown used to his sudden leave-taking and equally abrupt reappearances. Knowing that he would return in good time, Gord took the opportunity to stay with the woodsmen for a while and learn more of the ways of these people and their environment. He occasionally enjoyed the company of his great barbarian friend, but Chert was not around too much, since he and Wren were keeping company.

Curley Greenleaf soon returned to the place, however, and he often had time to spend with the young thief. Gord found this a most acceptable

substitute, for the druid informed him not only of the forest but of his persuasion as well. The idea that all things were a necessary part of life troubled Gord, but he found that he had to agree with many of the plump fellow's arguments. Without light, who could understand darkness, and vice versa. Thus, badness enabled the concept of good to be understood, and the cycle of birth and death, growth and decay, and each other pair of opposites were all part of a wheel that must forever turn if living things were to exist.

On matters affecting the woodlands, however, the druid was not so neutral. Gord laughed at this, for the young adventurer had an idea that despite everyone's protests, each had some particular point of view that was held above all others as the ultimate value or truth. Some sought order, others espoused total freedom for the individual. There were groups proclaiming that weal must be brought to all, while their opposites said the strongest must always prevail.

Greenleaf's moral and ethical views had their strengths, but Gord also noted weaknesses. He was wise enough not to point them out again after doing so once, for the heated debate that followed was quite enough for a lifetime as far as Gord was concerned. Thereafter, he kept such thoughts and opinions to himself. All said and done, the world seemed a place where man and deity put forth laws and ideas, dogma and lore to explain that which simply *was*. The whys and wherefores of it all were inexplicable to Gord, and as long as he managed to feel good and prosper, he was satisfied enough. If one day he was enlightened as to the mysteries of the multiverse, so much the better—but meanwhile, there was life to live.

Information from Curley regarding the arcane business of invocation of unknown forces and energies interested Gord far more than talk of world-views and philosophies. His days as a student had gained him much knowledge in many fields, but he knew very little of spell-casting and associated arts. While Curley Greenleaf did not actually instruct him in the secrets of druidical dweomercrafting, he did explain much of the theory and practice of the arts and disciplines involved not only with his, but also clerical and magical spells as well.

Gord thought that such lore would be most useful in understanding the workings of magical protections and devices, as well as to measure the potential of an adversary. He candidly told Curley this, and the druid laughed and accepted this observation, for his own philosophy and theology demanded such. Knowledge was part of the necessary whole, after all.

So the days rolled into weeks, and then Gellor returned again. He came to see his friends, and for no other purpose, he said. After the battle he had gone to the Blemu Hills, where King Archbold held court in Dunstan's castle. Afterward, with all necessary business there accomplished, he had paid his respects to the Gnomeking in the Flinty Hills once again, and then come back to this place in the Adri.

Gellor asked if Gord still cared to accompany him to Rel Mord as the two had once planned. Gord eagerly accepted the invitation, although he subsequently had mild reservations about leaving. Chert, by now, also was desirous of broadening his horizons, for he and the amazonian Wren had come to a parting of the ways, mainly due to the mighty-thewed barbarian's lack of interest in family life. The situation was uncomfortable, and a trip to a distant place was indeed a bright prospect under such circumstances.

Gord thought the idea of a group journey to Rel Mord grand, as did Curley Greenleaf, who planned on traveling in that direction anyway, having druidical business of some sort in the distant Celadon Forest west and south of Nyrond's capital city.

So, after the rough farewells and rude adieus customary to a leave-taking between forest folk, the four adventurers rode out of Stalker's thorp. Gord and Gellor still had the horses they had received from Dunstan. Greenleaf and the big barbarian were mounted on steeds of questionable worth, but ones that could be traded for more suitable animals at Innspa.

Gord wore a shirt of mail of such fine workmanship and lightness that it was undetectable beneath his outer garments. Greenleaf said it was chainmail of elfin make, and Gord was fortunate that he was of a size to be able to don it. The armor had come to him as his part of the spoils of war, just as had Chert's broadsword, shield, helmet, and mount. The four stayed only briefly within the town of Innspa, and with new horses under their companions, Gord and Gellor rode slightly ahead of the barbarian and the druid on the long highway running westward to Rel Mord. As the Flinty Hills slowly became a dim line on the horizon to his rear, Gord spoke to his companion.

"If you should ever see Evaleigh again in your travels, Gellor, will you tell her that I helped to assure the safety of her father's fiefdom… and that of her husband's palatine barony as well?"

The one-eyed man looked at his young friend for a long moment, weighing the statement. "Yes, Gord, I will assuredly tell your Evaleigh that,

should a private moment to do so ever present itself."

Satisfied, Gord nodded and rode on, whistling a little tune.

The journey to Rel Mord took just a little over a fortnight to accomplish, for they did not ride hard. During the course of the trip, Gord inquired of Curley Greenleaf as to his mode of transportation. After all, as Curley himself had said on more than one occasion, druids had means of moving about that took only minutes and covered hundreds of leagues.

"There is more to life than earth, tree, and sun, if you will pardon that near blasphemy!" exclaimed the druid. "We do have such ways and means, but druids are human—or partially so, in cases such as myself—and we enjoy good company, too."

Both of the younger adventurers had to agree to that, as they found the journey most enjoyable, traveling, as they were, in company. Eventually, the four came to the great capital of Nyrond, and outside its walls Curley Greenleaf parted from his friends. He had little love for, and no interest in, the doings of such places of buildings and folk not attuned to Nature. He said he would visit a few small places nearby where the druidical beliefs were still honored, and thereafter use his powers to go swiftly on to the Celadon. He said he would leave word at Woodwych as to his whereabouts, just in case anyone wanted to look him up later. And with that, he left.

Gellor brought Gord and Chert to the Nyrondel Royal Court, where they had an audience with King Archbold. While Gellor was for some reason not mentioned, Gord and Chert were feted properly. Although Gellor never volunteered the information, and Gord never asked, the young thief presumed that Gellor's value to the king as a diplomat and intermediary would have been seriously compromised if Gellor had been included in the group of celebrities. Anonymity was an ally of one such as Gellor, but Gord and Chert did not need to wear the same cloak.

The celebrated and handsome pair of "heroes from the great battle in the Adri" became desirable guests for the season, and they found themselves responding to a round of invitations to villas and nearby castles that didn't play itself out until Sunsebb was past and the last chill of Fireseek-month was giving way to the sun's growing warmth.

When eventually they were no longer novelties for festive display, and the ladies of the court had begun to seek elsewhere for swains, the two were actually glad. It was an exhausting business, this sophisticated routine of

banquets, parties, love-making, and intrigue. The barbarian was particularly disgusted with what he referred to as foppery and frippery, stating flatly that this was the reason that his sort were destined to inherit the world. The decadence and soft living of city and town, he proclaimed, would eventually cause the downfall of what these people called civilization, and then true folk would rule a cleaner and more simple Oerth, in which real virtues would be recognized.

While Gord wasn't ready to agree with his friend as to the merits of what the barbarian held as virtues, Gord wasn't so certain that the fellow's predictions about the downfall of the society of kingdom and state would not eventuate. Despite all of his predictions and remonstrances against the lifestyle of Rel Mord, Chert—and Gord, too, for that matter—did enjoy the time, attention, and ministrations of the lovely but fickle ladies of the city.

When, in due course, they were ready to leave, Chert was indifferent as to where they would travel, but Gord decided that he had seen enough of the east to last him for at least some time. The two agreed to head westward toward Woodwych and see if they could pick up some news of Curley Greenleaf. They had known for some time that when they wanted to embark, they would do so without Gellor, for he was involved in more of his own mysterious dealings, and his responsibilities would take him elsewhere.

Gellor gave them his wishes for safe and profitable wayfaring, as well as a map of the territory in which they planned to adventure. Thus equipped, Gord and his great-sized friend set forth again as the month of Coldeven ended and Growfest was being celebrated.

Both young men marveled greatly over the Highbridge, which spanned the Duntide River just below Rel Mord. The way to Woodwych was rather uneventful after that. Both had traveled much in recent months, and familiarity with such a process made the simple matter of going from one place to another less than thrilling. Going as they were through the central portions of the kingdom, there wasn't even the excitement of an encounter with marauder or monster to enliven things. They did run across some highwaymen, and that brief action broke the monotony, but the brigands soon fled, feeling that the loss of a half-score of their number was sufficient justification for the decision not to press the pair further.

Soon Gord and Chert came to Woodwych, and there they sought out the Chapel of Fharlanghn. There, Gellor had told them, was the place in that

town where their friend Curley Greenleaf would leave word as to his whereabouts, whether near or far. Later, both Gord and Chert would look back upon their arrival at the chapel as the beginning of their next great adventure together.

Chapter 27

Greenleaf had last been at the chapel only a few days before, the brown-robed clerics who tended the place informed the two newly arrived travelers. After Gord and Chert provided sufficient proof of their identities and their past relationship with Curley, one of the priests went off to fetch the message that the druid had entrusted to the keeping of Fharlanghn's servants before going on his way.

To pass the time while they waited, Gord inquired as to the nature of the deity served by these friendly clerics. He and Chert were not surprised to learn that Fharlanghn was an earthy sort, one venerated by travelers and wanderers, the deity of adventurers who held views not dissimilar to the ethos expressed by druidical faith, if not quite so bound up with Nature. In fact, the curate told them, not a few of both adhered to the tenets with equal respect, so there were druidical followers of Fharlanghn and some of Fharlanghn's servants who were of druidical sort—a confusing concept at first, the cleric admitted as he noticed Gord and Chert shaking their heads, but not really so hard to grasp when both ethoi were known and understood.

The priest returned with a scroll bearing a seal showing a circle of eight leaves and presented it to Gord. He tucked it into his belt-pouch, correctly sensing and quietly conveying to Chert that it would be highly impolite to examine the message while they were being entertained by the clerics of the chapel.

The conversation grew sufficiently interesting to both men to cause them to accept an invitation to join the clerics for the noon meal. Suppressing their curiosity about Curley's message, they enjoyed a good repast in the small refectory of the chapel and were treated to a rather unexciting description of the pan theology of the area. From what Gord heard, it seemed pretty much identical to that of the other places he had been. Chert was obviously as bored as his companion, but then the patriarch turned the talk to his deity once again, and this was more to the taste of the two adventurous travelers.

Eventually, other matters called the priests, and they blessed the two and sent them on their way. Gord caught Chert in the act of dropping coins into the contribution box, just as Gord was readying to slip alms in that receptacle himself. Both laughed at that and decided that the symbol of this friend of adventurers might be of benefit one day. Each added even more coins to the offering box, taking in return a pair of wooden discs, each

embellished with a horizon line and a colorful inlay of stone and metal. Using the leather thongs provided with the discs, Gord and Chert hung the symbols around their necks and left the chapel.

After returning to the tavern where their steeds were stabled, they ordered bumpers of dark beer and read the message left by Greenleaf. That is, Gord read while his friend listened, for the barbarian was unlettered. When the slight thief began to tease his companion about this ignorance, the reaction he got was sufficient to make him cease the jibes immediately. Then Gord asked sincerely if the woodsman would be interested in learning a bit about the markings called writing, and Chert readily agreed that such knowledge, while paltry compared to woodcraft and weapon play, might be useful at that.

Gord began to teach the big fighter the elements of reading as he worked through Curley's scroll, and Chert proved himself remarkably intelligent and quick to learn. When the missive's content was finished, the barbarian put the scroll in his girdle for future study.

In the writing, the druid related a bit of his business in the area and then got down to the point of the message—a vague reason for his departure from Woodwych. His mission was a matter of personal interest, wrote Curley Greenleaf, but if his two friends should care to join him, the druid would be happy to have their company. He would either be in Nellix, or else leave word there if he had reason to move on before they arrived. The destination he had in mind after Nellix was not mentioned, and no reason for the omission was stated or even hinted at. No matter, both Gord and Chert agreed; they had nothing better to do, and the mysterious matters of their strange friend might prove interesting.

They set out for the town of Nellix immediately.

The fastest way to this place skirted the fringe of the Celadon Forest, so their route was a half-circle looping northwest, then southwest, crossing the Nesser River into Urnst after some sixty leagues en route and only ten from their destination. The lands surrounding the place were quite similar to those Gord had seen in his visit to Leukish, and the people of this portion of the Duchy were likewise similar. Chert was interested in experiencing more of this area, but Gord wished only to move on. Nellix was rather dull to him after Rel Mord, and the differences between it and Woodwych were not noteworthy in his view.

The two men were greeted warmly by the clerics of Fharlanghn at the local temple, which was larger and more prosperous than its counterpart in Woodwych; evidently the deity was more revered in these parts than to the east. There was no message for them, save one of a verbal nature: Greenleaf had left word that the two should go to the Society of Sages and Scholars, a place near the colleges of Nellix, and seek out one Savant Iquander there. That was all.

They had no difficulty finding either the building or the man. Iquander was a green-robed, birdlike little fellow, once himself a cleric of Fharlanghn (thus the garment of the pastoral order of the deity), now turned savant. He was most helpful, inviting the two puzzled young men into his messy library, serving them a strange and bitter tea that sharpened their senses, and telling them in rambling fashion of Greenleaf's undertaking.

The Abbor-Alz, he began, was a long and dangerous line of hills. This rugged highland chain began far to the north at the shore of the Nyr Dyv and was generally known as the Cairn Hills in that -region. A narrow neck of the tors was so rough and high as to actually constitute mountains, and at this point the Cairn Hills become known as the Abbor-Alz, which is the Middle Common translation of "Dreaded Howes," as the area was called in Elder Suloise.

The eastern and southern portions of these tall mounds and steep valleys were not actually so bad, said the savant, if one discounted hostile hill tribes, monsters dwelling in these wilds, and similar stuff. From the Sea of Gearnat, up the Nesser River past Gnatmarsh to Celadon Forest, the Abbor-Alz penned in the Bright Desert, just as the highland plateaus and tors serve to do the same as the hills turned west to butt into Woolly Bay just below Hardby. Iquander informed them that the fairest portion of this range was within the Celadon Forest proper, and recommended a journey there at some future date if they enjoyed such pastime.

Anyway, the savant went on, it seemed that his old friend Greenleaf—their friend also, of course—had come across a piece of interesting lore while within the part of the Abbor-Alz that reached into the forest. This information had to do with the discovery of an ancient site of some sort, with great monoliths of standing slabs all ringed and set in special ways. A place of power and danger certainly—and one absolutely irresistible to a druid, naturally. Iquander had put together some of the pieces of this puzzle of information for Greenleaf. Now the rash fellow was off into the

countryside, bound and determined to find the exact location of the ruin and investigate it.

When the savant sought to launch into a discourse on similar sites, Gord managed to interrupt. Did the good savant know exactly when their friend, Curley, had set out? What route he had taken? Was the druid relying on his and Chert's assistance? Well, yes, Iquander told them, that was exactly the point. Greenleaf had just departed yesterday, leaving a map for his friends, and urging that they join him on the venture with all haste!

At last they had what they were after. As soon as Iquander came back from wherever he had stuck the map, they grabbed it and a brief note accompanying it, bid the garrulous sage good-bye, and hurried out. He was telling them something about demons, or daemons, or demodands—Gord was never sure which—as they hastened away. Much later on, when he thought about it, Gord wished that he and Chert had been a trifle less precipitant in departing….

The map sketched the territory between Nellix and Mauve Castle, a town at the edge of the Cairn Hills, while the note said simply that they should meet Curley at an inn called the Manticore's Tail near the southern gate of that latter town.

"This chasing after Curley is getting out of hand," Gord said sourly. "Why in hell can't he stay put long enough for us to catch up and find out from him what's going on? We'll probably get to the meeting place in Mauve Castle only to find he has flown off to somewhere else. We could end up traversing most of the Flanaess before we find him, and I for one have no desire to follow him across half a continent."

"Yah, old Curley is getting to be a pain in the ass with all this mysterious stuff," Chert agreed. "That's the problem with a druid who likes to play fighter—he won't stay home and mind his grove. He's just like Gellor, always going off on some kind of hush-hush business."

"You mean Greenleaf is more than a druid?"

"From what I understand, he's a pretty tough ranger. I hear that he and old one-eye were neophytes together up in the Gamboge Forest, and that's where he took to being a scout and spy. I suppose Gellor's influence got to him."

Now Gord was thoroughly puzzled. "What was Gellor doing with druids? You lost me somewhere."

"Oh, that's simple," Chert assured him. "Gellor is a bard. Haven't you ever heard him sing? He's got a pretty fair voice and plays the harp real good!"

"A bard has something to do with druidical studies?"

"That's what Curley told me," said the barbarian.

Gord let it go at that, figuring that he would learn more from Curley Greenleaf… if they ever met him again. He and his big companion rode fast in an attempt to catch up with the druid, hoping that they could make up his one-day head start before he got to his destination and headed off on another tangent. If he decided to employ his power to travel magically, neither Gord nor Chert thought they would ever locate Curley before he went off to find the megalithic ruin he was seeking.

The rotund druid was indeed traveling by conventional means. With Mauve Castle about one day's ride ahead, they did catch up with him at a roadside tavern, and the three reunited adventurers spent the night there. After they greeted each other and settled down at a table in the tavern, Gord and Chert were finally able to learn just what Greenleaf was questing after.

"I have heard in old epics," he told them, "that there was a place of great power in the Abbor-Alz, and the Archdruid of Celadon allowed me to read an ancient tablet he possesses. That gave me a clue as to where the place was and what it looked like, so I went to my old friend Iquander. He was able to dig up most everything else I needed to know."

"That's fine, Curley," Gord said sarcastically, "but how about telling *us* now?"

"Great idea, Gord!" chimed in the barbarian. "Come on, lay it out for us, Greenleaf, or we'll thump it out of you."

"Not here," the druid said seriously. "Too many ears to pick up something as important as what I have to tell you. Let's find a wench to serve us supper, and afterward we can retire to our chambers and talk. I'll explain it all then."

Both young men grumbled, but there was nothing to do but go along with Curley's plan. He wouldn't say anything in the common room of the tavern and wouldn't go elsewhere until he'd eaten. Chert said he was famished—and he did consume vast quantities of chow at every opportunity—and Gord was also feeling pangs of hunger, so they nodded acceptance of Curley's terms and ordered a meal. Soon the three were busily demolishing a roast capon, some egg and mutton-kidney pie, and various and sundry

comestibles delivered in stages by the serving woman. Finally, after the last bones were stripped bare of meat, the pie dish clean, and nothing but a few crumbs of bread to be seen on the table, Greenleaf sat back patting his round belly and Chert belched contentedly as he swigged down another pot of stout. Gord, having finished much sooner than his two companions, had been waiting impatiently for this event.

"If you two gundiguts have finally stopped stuffing yourselves," he said, "I think it high time we went upstairs so that Chert and I can learn the real meat of our chase halfway across the Flanaess!"

Still beaming with happiness at his repletion, the druid nodded and arose, leading the way to the rooms they had taken above.

"There is a great ring of stones," Curley began, as they sat in the small parlor adjoining the three bedrooms. "It is near here, within the mountains which split Cairn Hills from Abbor-Alz. There is a hidden valley there, a circular place which is unnatural. Steep walls ring a level plateau, and this ground, in turn, is hemmed by monoliths. Seven circles of different sorts of stones, there are. The size of the stones grows larger as the rings progress inward, from liths no bigger than a milestone to huge ones taller than a giant. These seven rings of stone encircle a cairn at the center. It is that which we must enter and explore!"

"What is inside?" asked Gord. "Gold? Gems?" Chert, not much interested in tales of worthless rocks, perked up at these last two words.

"I think not," Greenleaf answered slowly, and Chert looked bored again. "But there is possibly something of far greater worth within the barrow… a relic."

"What sort of relic?" Gord queried.

"What's a relic?" demanded the barbarian.

"A relic is something ancient, usually of great power, and often associated with the divine in some manner," the druid explained. "More than that I'm not prepared to say at this time."

"What's the sense of going there if there's no money in it?"

"Chert, my friend, there is more to life than money and fighting," Greenleaf said with a wry shake of his head.

"There's *women* there?" asked the barbarian with candor. "Or a good sword, maybe?"

Gord laughed at this, but Curley's response was serious. "No, no. But the relic—if there is one—would have value beyond belief. Should we actually

find one and manage to get it into the right hands, you'll both be rewarded with enough money to keep you happy for years—even at the rate you two young rogues spend the stuff!"

That was heartening talk indeed. Searching for this hidden ruin was making a whole lot of sense now. Gord and Chert expressed their eagerness to get going as early as possible.

"Well, there are a few preparations I must make first," the druid cautioned. "Spells, if you don't know it, require more than a few mumbling incantations and a wave of the hand, after all."

"What do we need spells for?" demanded the massive barbarian. "We've got swords!"

"If we find a relic, my boy, then we will certainly have to contend with whoever—or whatever—guards it. And such a guardian will require more than brute force, even strength such as yours, to overcome. If we are clever, and lucky too, we should be able to survive its attacks, destroy it, and bear our prize home in triumph!"

Greenleaf would say no more on the subject of the relic or its fearsome guardian, whatever that might be, despite the young men's wheedling and demanding. Curley bade them to remain patient a bit longer, assuring both that he would apprise them fully, in due time, of just what they were seeking and what they might encounter along the way.

"After all," he explained, "a slip of the tongue now could alert others as to what we seek, and there's no need for a contest of getting there first—or having to fight off others after we've taken the prize." Gord and Chert agreed to the sense of this approach, and retired to their chambers for the night.

Next day all three went on to the town of Mauve Castle, and therein the druid went about gathering whatever he needed for his coming work. After spending the following night in the Manticore's Tail, the trio set forth on their adventure, riding south and west toward the mountains.

Chapter 28

If the Abbor-Alz was a place where horses could not easily venture, the mountainous head of this area was far worse. The three riders took a southerly route along the edge of the jutting peaks that rose abruptly from the relatively level plain to the east. The entire chain was only some fifty miles long, and about half as wide, but the upthrust bluffs and craggy peaks were an impenetrable wall. Perhaps determined mountaineers could ascend these great mountains and descend on the other side, but no regular traffic, muleback or even afoot, could find a route through them.

Gord wondered out loud why they were riding along the edge in such fashion when it was obvious that they would have to proceed afoot eventually. It would have been better, he suggested, to have left their valuable steeds in some safe stable and have gone on shank's mare.

The druid assured Gord that he knew what he was doing, and he told both men to keep a sharp eye out for a small tor shaped like an ogre. Chert's keen gaze spotted this unusual-looking mountain late in the forenoon. It was quite as Curley had described it, once you knew what you were looking for and viewed it from the north. The rough, rocky ground near its base was forbidding, as were the clumps of scrub thorn that sprang from the poor soil between the mineral outcroppings.

"Now we must dismount and begin looking for a dry streambed," Greenleaf instructed. "There is a way up the range along it, and it passes the valley we seek, too."

"How do you know that?" Chert asked as the three began leading their horses through the rough terrain.

"A party fleeing the wrath of a Despotrix of Hardby came over these peaks and down into the Duchy. Eventually one of the few who survived ended up telling his tale, and somebody else wrote it down."

"Fine, I suppose," allowed Gord. "But how do we know it's a true account? It could be a yarn spun for fun or profit."

"We don't actually know for certain. Iquander stressed that point repeatedly," Curley answered. "So far, though, everything checks out, and the survivor's description of the ruin in the depression matched exactly what I'd picked up from other sources. That, my boys, he couldn't have made up. What we must do now is find the path that he claimed took their fleeing band down into Urnst's green fields… the place from where we shall travel

upward to our goal! A dry streambed heading up toward Ogre Peak is what we must find."

"That makes sense to me, Curley," said Chert. "Even though there's no trees covering the tors ahead, I was raised in country nearly as rough as this. I can find what we're looking for."

Gord knew that was not an idle boast, and when the druid said he was fairly adept at such work himself, Gord reconciled himself to tagging along and letting the two of them worry about the matter. However, on Curley's advice they split up, each staying within hailing distance of another, able to search more ground than if they traveled in a close group.

After less than an hour of walking and looking, Gord got a surprise. Had he not been holding tight to his horse's reins, he would have tumbled headlong down a steep dropoff screened by weeds and grass. The narrow gully obviously served as a watercourse when rain fell on the mountains above and drained along its channel. Gord walked alongside the dropoff for a hundred yards and saw that its path seemed to curve upward. He called for the others to join him and continued moving along the wash. He called out excitedly several more times before Curley and Chert caught up with him. The city-bred thief had indeed found the purported route into the heart of the mountains—but he saw no need to reveal that he had merely, and quite literally, stumbled upon it.

Whether or not it would eventually take them to the vale of the ringstones, the streambed did enable the adventurers to take their horses upward. The work was slow, however. There were twists and turns at first, and then the gully became a canyon. There were boulders in heaps, and splits that had to be explored. The going was steep and rough, and the three were tired when the sun began to slip behind the jagged mountain-tops ahead of them. They started to look for a suitable place to camp and soon found a broad ledge jutting out from the canyon wall above them.

It took some arduous work for the men and the mounts they led to pick their way along an oblique route that took them gradually up the canyon wall until they reached the outcropping. It turned out to be well worth the trip; the ledge was sheltered on the sides and top, almost as if they were in a shallow cave with a projecting lip at its entrance.

Chert went out to gather forage for the horses, returning with a great armful of coarse grass and other shrubbery he found in the immediate area. The men ate a cold meal from their trail rations, washed down with a little

water. When Gord complained about their shortage of drinking water, the druid pointed out that a rain would bring them more water than they might like. Gord shuddered as he considered the prospect of being caught in the big ravine as it flooded—this was a risky venture indeed!

Almost as if on cue, the stars were blanketed by clouds, and rain began to fall around midnight. It was a gentle rain, and it lasted for most of the night; then, when the sun began to rise, the light seemed to dissipate the precipitation.

By now, however, the canyon held a gurgling, rushing torrent of water, and for a few tense minutes the flood slowly mounted higher toward their shelter. Then, as it began to recede, thunder rumbled and another storm broke. This time the rain pelted down in fat drops, accompanied by gusty winds, rippling forks of blue-white lightning, and rumbling bangs of thunder that were intensified and echoed by the mountains around them. Here was a display that made the magic of seem mankind pale stuff indeed.

As quickly as it came, this storm ceased, but the water was again rising. This whole process continued throughout the day, penning the men and animals in their rocky shelter and threatening to sweep them away as the level of rushing water rose higher and higher.

Finally, when the torrent had come up over the floor of their shelter and they were standing in water that was nearly knee-deep, Curley Greenleaf resorted to use of his power. He called up a howling cyclone wind that pushed the flood down and away sufficiently to allow the party to escape with nothing worse than wet feet and a chill. They passed an uncomfortable night marooned on the ledge, but the druid's enchantment had forced the waters to recede enough for the three to recline and sleep fitfully on the damp stone.

The light of morning revealed only a trickle of water in the canyon below them, and the bedraggled adventurers left their haven and pushed upward again, skirting pools and taking respectful note of the destruction caused by the pouring stream created by runoff from the slopes around them.

"Next time we camp on a higher ledge," Gord said with finality as he observed the battered and drowned remains of a hill giant somehow caught by the onrush of water. His companions agreed.

With drinking water no longer a problem for some time to come, food became their next concern. They had sufficient quantities of iron rations to last them a week, and some grain for the animals too, but it was safer to

augment the former by hunting, while allowing the animals to browse on the sparse vegetation that had survived the flash flood. After the group traveled for the better part of the day and found another likely place to camp, Gord was put in charge of the animals while the barbarian and the druid sought game for their evening meal.

The hobbled mounts knew what to do without direction, but Gord needed to be alert in case of attack by some hungry predator. A mountain lion, drawn by the scent of horses, did make an appearance, but several well-placed stones from the young thief's sling sent the creature away amidst a great amount of hissing, spitting, and caterwauling. After calming the terrified animals, there was nothing else for Gord to do but wait. His friends eventually came back bearing a small goat, and that night they ate roasted meat instead of cold rations. The partially cooked portions left over from their feast would provide ample food for the following day as well, so at last the party felt confident in moving ahead.

Travel the next day was even more tortuous than it had been before. They were forced to scissor their way up the steeply rising slope, and at day's end Curley estimated that they had walked five miles while actually only progressing about half that far toward their goal. The area was so barren that not even savage beasts or monsters cared to inhabit these mountains. That, at least, allowed them yet another night of undisturbed rest, although they kept vigilant watch nonetheless; all three still had vivid memories of the dead hill giant, and this made them alert to danger of all sorts.

Another half-day of similar trekking brought them to the virtual summit of the narrow range. Greenleaf made careful observations of the terrain as they struggled upward, and finally, as they approached the highest elevation, he pointed to the left, calling the attention of his companions to what he saw.

"At last! See that defile there, and the notch in the crest above? That's where we must go," the druid told them. "The account says that a hidden valley lies beyond, and therein is the depression and the ringstones. If we press on, we can be there before nightfall."

Hurry they did, and they arrived at the place panting and sweating, but feeling exhilarated by success. Before them was the plateau, a gentle mound of stone and vegetation, surrounded by harsh cliffs and peaks. Gasping in the thin air, they worked their way up the rising ground to see what it hid

from their view. When they arrived atop this mound, the last light of the sun showed them the unnaturally circular dell and the rings of stone within it.

"Now you trust my judgment, right, lads?" the exultant druid exclaimed with glee. "I knew it was here!"

"If we really thought you were taking us on a will-o-wisp hunt, Curley, do you think we'd have gone through all this crap?"

"Yah, Gord," Chert agreed. "Screwing around in mountains is fun, but I came along on this one to get rich."

While Gord's opinion about clambering over mountains was at odds with that of his barbarian companion, the intent of both statements was the same. They had accompanied Greenleaf on the strength of his information and his conviction. Even if they had voiced occasional doubts, both adventurers had actually trusted in the druid and expected to find what they were now gazing upon. Gord thought it interesting that Curley seemed more surprised at the actual discovery than his associates were.

This night's camp was a cheerful one, despite their meager meal of tough dried meat and coarsely ground grain softened with a bit of vinegar and water. Scant supper finished, they discussed the plan of action for the next day.

Curley wished to carefully sketch the whole place from their elevated vantage point before they actually approached it. Then he would make measurements and do more mapping when they went down to the site. The ancient place was an historical discovery, after all, in addition to being the probable repository of a most valuable treasure. The druid said that it would take two full days for this preliminary work, even with both of his companions assisting in the measuring and examination, and only on the third day should they attempt to penetrate the great pile of stone at the center of the rings.

At that, Chert and Gord set up a vehement protest. They demanded no more than one day be spent on scholarly business, and the next for adventure. Curley consented to get along without the sketching, reasoning that he could construct a drawing from memory, and resolved to head for the dale first thing in the morning. That compromise was agreed to, and they settled down to sleep.

But their rest on this night was uneasy. Nightmares and restlessness plagued all three, and a lethargic feeling persisted in each of them as they

proceeded down the slope of the plateau, until the warmth of late morning seemed to burn the feeling away.

Each of them discovered these facts about the others as they went about the work that the druid directed. Conversations they had between drawing, pacing, and measurement with rope or hand revealed their mutual experiences of the previous night. It was evident, the druid concluded with a tone of deep concern in his voice, that the cairn was not a deserted ruin, but it contained something malign, and this was what had caused their unease.

Instead of camping near the depression that night, Curley had the group move to a place farther away, and assured Gord and Chert that this would lessen the evil effects of the guardian of the cairn. After another sparse meal, he sat them down and went into a lecture.

"I spoke only vaguely of a guardian," the druid began, "for I half expected there to be none. Actually, you two had more confidence that this site existed than I did…. I suppose I feared to hope too strongly so as to avoid too great a disappointment if the tale proved to be fictitious. So, if only a part of me thought we would even locate the ringstones, then the existence of a relic and the thing said to protect it could receive still less credence in my mind."

The druid-ranger paused for a moment to reflect, slowly stroking his chin in meditation. "The mention of a prize within the cairn was made to tempt you two to come along," he confessed. "You are friends, and I wanted your company. But, what I thought might be only an illusory lure now seems most probable indeed. Unfortunately for all of us, that also indicates that the balance of the story I heard is likely factual as well."

Before his companions could toss out questions and accusations about what they had just been told, Greenleaf launched into the rest of his tale quickly.

"According to the survivor's account," he said, "the fleeing men were much worn from climbing up the western side of this range, and when they accidentally found this place, they rested for a time and allowed their nearly dead steeds to graze and recover as well. Of course, they explored the stone circles and the sealed cairn in the middle, but found no means of easy access to the barrow's interior. However, being robbers by nature, such a place was irresistible to them. They all voted to remain and find or force

entrance one way or another, despite whatever bad occurrences they might encounter.

"The group was haunted by horrible night visions, and on the very first morning afterward one of their number went insane and threw himself off the edge of the slope into the dell, breaking his neck in the fall. That incident was passed off as merely a breakdown of nerves from flight and exhaustion. The next night another of these brigands awoke to find a companion staring at him with glowing, red eyes. The leering fellow attacked madly, and in the following struggle both attacker and attacked were killed. In a mere two days, three of the group had died, but the desire of the rest to find what was buried beneath the great stone slabs of the cairn prevailed over their fear—greed has that sort of power over foolish and evil beings.

"An entrance to the place was discovered the next day, and a number of the brigands were able to move the block concealing it and go in. What they found was not to their taste, however. After their torches gave them the barest glimpse of some sort of fabulous treasure, the flames of their brands were suddenly extinguished, and a terrible fear came over them. They stampeded back along the route they had taken, in a wild and confused rush through the lightless, narrow stone maze.

"Their retreat was even more panicked because of the blood-curdling screams and terrible rending and cracking sounds that echoed past them from behind. Those near the front of the on-rushing group realized that their comrades were being slain and crushed one by one, with incredible brutality and swiftness, by something that was overtaking them even as they wildly sought escape."

Gord stirred uneasily but did not interrupt Curley's horrendous tale.

"One of the band was a wicked cleric, a priest of some cursed and malign being or other entity unknown now. That one managed to employ his power to create a bright sphere of glowing light, and its radiance showed what doomed them—a demon of most awful aspect! Somehow, a *cataboligne* was bound within the cairn. This monstrous guardian, mad with centuries of confinement, was wreaking a hideous vengeance upon the intruders. The cleric attempted to turn the demon, or possibly to treat with it. It was this effort that enabled the front-runners to escape and seal the tomb on the demon and the rest of their fellows—including the hapless priest."

"And then what?" demanded Chert, unaware that the tale was over.

"Well, at least one lived happily ever after in Urnst," Curley replied dryly in an attempt to break the tension he felt.

But Gord was not in a humorous mood at all. "We are going where this… demon, named Catabo-something, waits with the shattered skeletons of who knows how many brigands—and some priest of evil's gnawed remains, too? Are you mad?" Gord said, his voice rising in pitch and volume on the last three words.

Greenleaf responded with calm indignation. "What lurks within the cairn is a cataboligne, which, for your information, is a sort of demon, not the true name of one."

"So what's in a name? A demon of any sort smells foul to me! If we are to find treasure, let's look elsewhere," said the young thief with a shudder. Gord was now quite set on not going any further with this whole business, and his tone and expression relayed this opinion clearly.

"Aw, come on, Gord," urged the big barbarian. "A demon is just a bigger, nastier… ogre… or something like that. We've got our blades, and Curley here can use his spells and stuff. We can't come all this way and then turn tail and leave a fortune behind because it's guarded by some old catabowly demon now, can we?"

The druid interjected his own counter also. "Before you run off, Gord, my lad, ask yourself this: How many fleeing bandits and outlaw brigands are you equal to?"

"I'll take on a dozen of that sort of scum anytime!" Chert said with steel in his voice.

"Then consider that," said Greenleaf in an encouraging tone, "and consider this as well: I have more powers than some little cleric serving a malign master—not to mention my skill with weapons."

The exchange continued for a while in this vein. Gradually, as Gord's initial shock subsided, he became convinced that he should remain with his comrades. The words of Curley and Chert did help, but in large measure Gord persuaded himself to stay. After all, these were his boon companions with whom he had agreed to adventure. And he would not desert them now, cataboligne demon or no. Tomorrow they would enter the cairn, with weapons and spells ready to counter the evil of its demonic guardian.

Chapter 29

When Gord woke suddenly, the first thing he saw in the pale light of the pre-dawn sky was an enormous bear biting the arm and shoulder of the druid. Without hesitation, Gord sprang to his feet, sword in hand, shouting for the sleeping barbarian to awaken and help defend their companion. The great ursine jaws released their hold on Greenleaf, the head swung toward the source of the sudden commotion, and a horrible growl rumbled forth from deep within the bear's body.

"Stop! Stand still!" shouted the druid at his companions.

Both young men froze, obedient but perplexed. Gord remained poised to lunge, and Chert stood with axe in hand, about to charge.

The druid spoke a few soft, growling sounds, and the monstrous cave bear relaxed again. As the druid continued to communicate in this fashion, the animal sat on its ponderous haunches, lolled its tongue, and stretched forth its head. Greenleaf scratched and pounded the place between its ears, and the bear made odd, whining groans of pleasure at this rough petting. Gord looked at Chert quizzically and saw the barbarian break into a knowing grin as he witnessed the interplay between the animal and the druid. The young thief turned his gaze back to Curley, wearing a frown of confusion.

"This bear is Yurgh. Or, at least, that's as close as human speech can come to pronouncing his name," the druid said as he continued to administer his scratching and patting, much to the evident delight of the furry creature he spoke about. "It seems that he alone resides in this territory, dwelling in a cave not too far distant.

"During my watch last night," the druid continued, "I summoned any animals within the area to come to our assistance, but only Yurgh here responded. We are friends now, he and I, and he will aid us in what lies before us. I enlist his service with great regret, for I fear that the catabolignе will treat Yurgh roughly, and the death of such a wonderful creature as this will mark my spirit sorely. I have told him of the adversary, however, and the great old fellow agrees to fight the demon willingly, hating all things such as it represents."

"You call and speak with bears?" Gord was having trouble grasping what the druid had done.

Chert had no such difficulty, having been around nature priests for all of his life. "Sure thing, Gord," the barbarian said before Greenleaf could reply.

"I've seen this pretty often, and it's no big deal. If I wasn't still asleep when you started shouting, I'd have known better than to worry about Curley and a bear chumming it up."

More than a little miffed at Chert's casual passing off of his efforts, Greenleaf ceased his petting of Yurgh to point out that the huge ursine was a formidable foe and an ally to the death. "Can you bring such help for us?" the druid demanded of the young barbarian. "Even a warrior such as you would find his hug somewhat uncomfortable—no big deal, indeed!" finished the druid with a harrumph, and he resumed his scratching of the now-restless bear.

"Sorry, Curley," Chert said hastily. "You know I didn't mean that it was nothing—only that calling bears and stuff is a power all you druids have."

Gord freely admitted that he, for one, was duly impressed, and Greenleaf was thereby mollified. That settled, the three adventurers and their grizzled pet of monstrous proportion headed for the depression. It was a matter of an hour or so before they came within sight of the bowl containing the circled stones, clambered down the narrow path to its bottom, and advanced to the piled slabs resting at the very center of the inner ring of megaliths.

"Here is what bars the entrance to the barrow," Greenleaf said, pointing to a large rectangle of rock in front of him. The stone showed marks of tools that had been wielded upon its surface, and it was somewhat askew, wedged in place with other stones obviously added as if by afterthought.

"How do we move it?" asked the muscular barbarian. "I'd say it weighs a couple of tons."

"The thing pivots, according to the story," said the druid as he surveyed the slab. "Let's get the detritus out of the way and give it a try. Yurgh, here, can use his strength to help us pull it open."

It took a bit of work for the three men to clear away the shards of stone, which had been broken away from the ancient ruins by time and weather and gathered up by the frightened bandits years ago in their efforts to wedge fast the portal. Other stones too, boulders of some size, had been heaped at the base of the slab. The great bear watched the men's labor with seeming fascination, content to bask in the bright warmth of the morning sun as the two-legged little creatures cleared the rubble.

"Damn that fat lazy bastard of a bear," Chert muttered as he tugged and pulled away a chunk of splintered megalith from its obstructing position. "Couldn't you have ordered him to help us, Curley?"

"Yurgh can do a lot, but his claws aren't fingers, nor his forelegs arms," the druid said, supervising the last bit of work. "Besides, he enjoys watching and resting," he added with a grin and a wink in the general direction of the monstrous animal. Then he spoke seriously. "Don't forget, he has agreed willingly to fight against the guardian, putting his life in jeopardy for no reward other than the encounter itself!"

"Wonderful," Gord interjected with sarcasm. "But let's cut the crap about what that bear should or will do and get on to the opening of this blasted barrow! We'll be here at midnight if you two don't stop jawing at each other and lend me a hand!"

Gord was attempting to pull the huge slab of stone open by himself, and his efforts were having no effect. Curley murmured something for a few seconds, and then Yurgh seemed to understand what was needed, for the cave bear ambled up, brushed the young thief aside with a casual swipe, and inserted the claws of his great forepaws into the crack between slab and cairn wall.

The animal pried and scratched at the projecting lip of the portal, making strained growling sounds as he worked with obvious great effort. After watching this for a few minutes, Gord became concerned for the continued good health of their new ally, and he was about to request that he be called off by the druid who commanded him.

Then Yurgh suddenly spraddled his hindquarters, dug his rear claws into the earth, and tore at the slab with even more vigor. The fur of the mighty creature rippled, showing where muscles bunched and moved beneath the thick hair and hide. The stone closure came slowly forward several inches, then stopped again.

As Yurgh sat back with a satisfied grunt, the three men hurried around his body to examine what the bear had accomplished. They could see a crack of a finger's breadth between the portal and the lithic post. Curley theorized that the heavy slab had been forced shut when the brigands fled the barrow, and in their haste to slam it on what was inside, they had probably jammed it on something that had forced it somewhat askew and prevented it from closing properly. Whatever that was now also prevented the slab from coming open. Greenleaf peered for a time into the crack, his hands cupped along the sides of his face to shut out as much sunlight as possible.

"I can detect nothing in the antechamber beyond," he told the expectant pair beside him. "Let's see if we can use our brute force to unstick this

door." He put his fingers through the crack and got a grip on the inner edge of the slab. Gord and Chert did likewise, and Yurgh put one of his monstrous paws to work on the crevice as well, reaching between human legs in order to find a place where his claws could add strength to the attempt.

For several agonizing seconds, even the combined pull failed to move the portal. Then the slab pivoted outward suddenly, with a shriek of stone on metal. The pivot pin that had been holding the stuck door snapped with a loud ping, giving way under the pressure. Chert, who had been tugging mightily, lost his footing abruptly now that the force of his pull was meeting no resistance. His stumbling fall carried his companions back and asprawl also, at the same instant that Yurgh jerked back from the opening with speed hard to believe for a creature so massive. As all four of them watched from their prone positions several feet away, the now-free slab teetered for a split second. Then inertia had its way, and the great stone fell away from the opening and crashed to the ground.

"We are committed now," the druid said heavily as he eyed the array of arcane sigils graven into the inner face of the stone door. Traces of pigment could still be seen in some of the incised marks, presumably chiseled by some ancient binder of demons.

"Let us pray we don't end up like him," Gord remarked, drawing the attention of his companions to what lay on the floor just inside the barrow's entrance.

The three paused a moment at the sight. Half of a mail-clad skeleton was there. What had become of its lower parts was moot. Both parts of a broken, rusted sword blade lay near a gauntlet of steel that sheathed the skeleton's right hand. The left gauntlet and accompanying hand had apparently been wedged beneath the slab when the portal was forced shut; all that remained of them now were bits of rusted, twisted metal and splintered bone. It was likewise obvious that the entombed brigand had sundered his sword blade against the inner surface of the portal in a futile attempt to force it open.

As he gazed somberly upon this tragic spectacle, Gord wondered what pleadings and beggings his comrades had ignored as they trapped this man. Then he was emboldened by the knowledge that he had better companions than those responsible for this sight, and these thoughts strengthened his resolve to go into the cairn.

"Now we must be victorious, or die in the trying," Green-leaf whispered, continuing his previous line of thinking. "If the thing within is loosed, it will ravage and devour countless hapless souls before it can be found again and sent back to its stinking home below—if indeed this could ever be done!"

"If axe can cleave it," Chert rumbled, "then it is a dead demon indeed, for I will confront it now!" With that pronouncement, the tall barbarian strode into the barrow, not waiting to see what his associates would do. The others followed on his heels, and the three humans and one cave bear faced the unknown together.

The antechamber they entered was illuminated by light that streamed in through the doorway exposed by the fallen slab. It was a chamber about six paces in width and five in depth. The low ceiling of stone made Chert, Curley, and the bear crouch out of necessity; Gord stood stooped over for another reason, feeling oppressed at the thought of the tons of stone over his head. Many of the slabs were old and cracked, and he tried not to think about what would happen if the whole affair came tumbling down.

Yurgh, seeming agitated, pushed his way to the front of the group and swung his barrel-like head from side to side, sniffing the musty, foul air. Then he issued forth a horrible growl that seemed to make the stones ring with its ferocity. The three adventurers saw that the monstrous ursine was glaring at the narrow opening in the rear wall of the antechamber's rightmost portion, its lintel joining the outer blocks of the wall there. Then they heard a shuffling sound.

A grinning apparition suddenly leaped around the corner of the opening and into their view. It was a dead, gray-colored thing, a rotted corpse with tattered lips falling away to reveal yellow teeth bared in the grin of death. Somehow it still lived; a half-life of awful sort existed within the body and animated it with fell force that gave its decaying flesh and leathery, mummylike skin the power to move with speed and purpose. The unnatural condition that imbued this thing exuded from its putrescent eyes. All but the bear recoiled at the sight of the horrible thing.

The creature before them was clad in the moldering remains of what had once been garments of some priestly sort. Although it seemed to be able to move with agility, the arms and legs of the corpse belied this. These members appeared to have been wrenched and disjointed, so that they now

protruded at unnatural angles. Yet the thing did move, and its withered right hand had the strength to hold the corroded iron of a mace.

All of this was perceived in an instant, for the pause of the undead corpse was only momentary. The thing gave another leap, arms and legs going out at crazy angles, and moved to attack the bear, which was still in the forefront. As the zombie advanced it raised its flanged metal club, intending to bring the weapon down upon Yurgh's head. The monster's skeletal face looked even more fiendish as its jaws opened in a soundless effort to shriek its hatred and fury.

Yurgh was not simply waiting for the stinking thing's blow. The bear also lunged forward, and this move carried the animal close to the creature so that the mace impacted on the matted bristles of Yurgh's humped shoulders, at the same time that the maw of the animal stretched wide and clamped shut on the thing's crooked left arm. The weapon blow certainly hurt the bear, but Yurgh seemed to pay it no heed. With a savage shake of his massive head, the bear sent the zombie flying sideways—all of the thing, that is, but its left arm, which had come loose at the shoulder and was still in the bear's mouth. The creature smacked into the wall of the antechamber with a meaty sound, but without hesitation was up on its twisted legs again, mace rising for another attack.

Gord, finding himself on the zombie's flank as it again advanced toward the bear, took matters into his own hands. He lunged forward, ducking under the zombie's upraised mace, and thrust his swordpoint into the creature's right leg as the thing was turning to meet this new threat. Gord withdrew his weapon quickly, but not fast enough to avoid a grazing blow from the mace. He saw stars as an iron flange glanced off his forehead, and he reeled back. Although blood now blinded his left eye, Gord had seen enough to know that his stab had apparently done little harm to his opponent. He took a second to shake his head, trying to clear his senses, and when he looked up again he saw the foul creature was aiming another blow at him.

"To your grave, damned thing!" Chert cried as he came up behind the creature and brought his great battle-axe down. Because of the low ceiling and the closeness of the melee, the blow could not be delivered with full force, but it was still strong enough to send the blade through the steel plate and chain mesh protecting the undead thing's shoulder.

The barbarian's blow did not fell the zombie, but it threw the thing off balance, so that the mace it wielded swished through empty air. As it exposed itself thus, Curley Greenleaf jabbed his spear forward, scoring a hit on the zombie's rotting body. "This thing is tough," he shouted to his companions, ducking another swing of the undead cleric's rusty mace.

The bear growled hideously, but the crowded conditions did not permit it enough space to attack fully. Yurgh had spit out the moldering member from his mouth, shaking it free and then trying to clear the foul taste from his mouth. Gord had moved back and was also out of the fight for the moment, trying to clear his vision and staunch the flow of blood that was running down from the wound on his head and blinding him. Chert and the druid continued to press the zombie so that it could do naught but face them in return.

If the damage done to its undead body caused it pain, there was no evidence of it. Gaping jaws still sounding its silent scream, lambent hatred burning in its eyes, the zombie sought to crush its foes with the weapon it had used in life.

"When I stab it, you strike from the side!" Greenleaf shouted as he dodged another swing of the iron mace. Then he thrust his spear forward into the thing's body again.

The barbarian gave a cry that sounded like "Brrrr!" as he swung his weapon in an arc perpendicular to the zombie's body. With both of his hands clasped on the haft of the great axe, his teeth clenched, his muscles working to their fullest, Chert drove the blade hard and true, hitting the thing at the waist just as the druid yanked his spear out of its torso. The curving blade cut the rotting thing nearly in half, and the zombie fell back and down.

The thing twitched and jerked, but did not stand upright again. Its lolling head showed only empty eye sockets where the evil light had burned a moment earlier. Then the air was filled with the sound of a deep, dry chuckle coming from the interior of the cairn, so pervasive that it seemed to flow right through the stone itself. It was the most evil sound Gord had ever heard.

"Yurgh! Guard the doorway there," the druid said, following the words with a gesture and a few guttural sounds. The bear complied, moving next to the opening on the back wall that the zombie had come through. Curley

turned and surveyed his friends, a thin smile on his lips. "Well, that's that," he said. "Now, Gord, let's take care of that gash on your head."

Gord had overcome the dizziness that beset him when he was hit, had managed to clear the blood from his left eye with a piece of linen torn from his undershirt, and was dabbing at the wound. The druid moved him near the entrance and peered at the cut in the light there.

"It's not a serious wound," he said, "but who knows what foulness was on that mace? I'll have it taken care of in a moment!" The young thief watched as Greenleaf took a small jar from his belt pouch, opened it, and with a bit of clean cloth took out a small portion of the amber-colored ointment therein. The stuff made his skin tingle when the druid applied it to the wound, the cut stung briefly, and then all pain was gone. A small moan of satisfaction escaped Gord's lips as the magical medicine finished its work.

"The wound is closed, my friend," said Curley, "and your forehead is as good as new—except for a small scar you'll have there. Clean off the rest of the blood, and we'll be ready to get on with this business." The druid turned back inside the chamber then and saw the barbarian examining the remains of their foul and unnatural foe.

"Hey, Curley, what kept this thing going?" asked Chert as he wiped the blade of his weapon on the creature's tattered garments. "It looks as if it has been dead for years!"

"The zombie?" Greenleaf asked rhetorically. "No doubt some malign power desired to keep the corpse animated with wicked force to serve as a slave. That was no ordinary zombie, though. I've encountered a few of these undead in my travels, and this one was far worse than any of the others."

"Whatever… the thing went down easily enough when kissed by *Brool* here!" the barbarian giant said as he hefted his huge axe.

"*Brool,* you say? An interesting name for an axe," said Curley. "I detected a low hum coming from it as you felled the zombie with that last stroke. Why have I never heard you call it by name it before now?"

Chert grinned at the druid. "This has been handed from father to son in my family for generations. I named it to you without thinking, and now you know its secret too. When called by name the weapon strikes true and sinks deep, as if it were alive. Perhaps it is, or perhaps it carries a dweomer…. I neither know nor care. It is a true friend, tried and trusted!"

"Indeed, a friend of us all," Gord chimed in. He had finished cleaning himself up and rejoined the group.

Curley Greenleaf nodded knowingly and spoke no more about the matter. He turned his attention to the bear just as Yurgh let out a low rumble.

"Our friend senses the presence of something else awaiting us inside," said the druid. "Now it is time to go down and see what that is. May our weapons prove potent and our enemy be confounded!"

The three men went to the doorway and peered inside. They could see a small landing that gave onto a flight of worn steps heading to the right and descending into total darkness.

"Here, Chert," said the druid as he fumbled in his belt and withdrew a small bag of black felt. From the bag he took a small, glowing object that made the antechamber almost as bright as day. He reached up and touched it to the front of the barbarian's helmet, and there it stuck. "You have not the vision of elvenkind as I do, and neither Gord nor Yurgh can see in darkness either. This lodestone will stay fast to the steel of your helmet, shedding its light, a magical illumination neither hot nor flickering, for us all to see by. Agreed?"

Chert accepted readily, and the group proceeded ahead, delving below the grim cairn. Gord, sword in hand, thought about the strange sort of sight his weapon bestowed upon him but did not mention it to his companions.

Chapter 30

The ancient steps were hewn from the rock of the mountain itself, their chiseled edges worn smooth over the ages by persons or things that these adventurers could not guess at. Chert led the way, followed by Curley Greenleaf, Gord, and then the huge bear, who had some difficulty squeezing his bulk through the narrow confines of the place. The quartet descended slowly, each member keeping within two or three steps of the others at all times. Gord kept count of the steps as he negotiated them, and reached the bottom and the number ninety at the same time. The three men fanned out at the end of the stairway, slowly turning to survey the place they had found beneath the stone barrow.

They were in a natural cave, a domed grotto of circular shape. The roof of the cave was hung with long stalactites, and the floor was dotted with mounds that looked like rounded-off stalagmites, as if something had passed over them frequently. Leaning against the wall nearby were several pitch-covered pieces of wood, obviously a store of torches left there long ago. Three passages led away from this large chamber, the entrance to each showing evidence of having been shaped by tools in some distant age. One was directly across from the stair, while the other two offered egress to the left and the right. None of these dark passages seemed more or less promising than the others. Which led to the demon's lair? Which to the hidden relic? Perhaps none… or all.

"Let's go straight ahead," suggested Gord. "If we come to any branchings, we always turn right. That way we can never lose our way."

His two companions agreed, and the great bear simply followed the druid. The four went to the arched entry to the chosen passage and looked cautiously down its length. The magical light shed by the lodestone affixed to Chert's steel cap allowed them to see sixty feet into the tunnel, formed of a combination of natural and worked stone.

A faint stirring of the air brought to their noses a putrid odor, a nauseating mixture of decay and foulness. Yurgh snorted as the scent struck his nostrils. Then the bear pushed past the humans, heading down the broad passageway at a fast shuffle. Gord, Chert, and Greenleaf followed quickly, passing through the entrance one by one, and then moving into a line abreast once past that stricture. The corridor was about six paces wide, more than sufficient space for the three men to travel and fight side by side.

With Gord on the left, Greenleaf in the center, and Chert on the right, they followed the bear, keeping within two or three paces of Yurgh's flanks.

Once they were thirty or forty feet inside the passage, the light revealed a wall in the distance. They were coming to an intersection where the way was no longer straight; paths curved to the left and the right, which gave the men their first opportunity to put Gord's procedure into action. But Yurgh knew nothing of such intentions, nor would he have cared if he had. The bear lumbered ahead and into the left corridor without hesitation.

"His nose tells him which way to go," said the druid quietly to his companions as they trotted to keep up with the animal. "So that's the way we go, too."

The passage curved gently and seemed to be heading back in the general direction of the grotto they had just left. The clicking of the bear's claws and the pounding of the men's leather heels on the stone floor raised faint echoes around them. The vaulted ceiling of the passageway sent these sounds bouncing back and forth in a confusing manner. The noise did not seem to distract Yurgh in the least, for he went on without pause, veering to the right into another straight tunnel when the corridor they were trodding branched in a Y-shape. Gord began to feel himself losing all sense of distance and direction as their ursine bloodhound took them right yet again into another curving branch of the passage, then along one more straight course, before suddenly coming to a halt in front of another intersection.

"He pauses to sniff which way the demon lies," the druid said.

"Phew!" Chert replied and spat as he did so. "This reeking stench is so foul that the thing must be everywhere."

Yurgh swung his barrel-like head back and forth several times, making snorting and snuffling sounds with his nose, then held his snout pointed to the left for a long second. With a grunt, the monstrous cave bear moved forward again, slowly this time, holding his nose close to the chiseled stone beneath them as he took the left-hand branch.

Suddenly the sound of a high-pitched giggle enveloped the group, making the humans start. At this, Yurgh growled loudly, and the bear's mane of fur bristled. Gord felt horripilations on his head as well. Walking stiffly, baring his teeth and growling, the bear went on, closely followed by the three men. They would all soon face the demonic cataboligne in what the men presumed would be a fight to the death.

After what seemed hundreds of yards, but was certainly not that far, the curved walls of the passage once more offered a choice of direction. The correct one was evident to all at this point, however, for a dull, blue-violet luminosity pervaded the air in the tunnel to the right. Then the light faded and again laughter sounded—neither chuckle nor malign giggle this time, but a sweet peal of melodious laughter, seductively feminine and appealing, gently echoing down the passage. The bear snarled but continued to move slowly. After exchanging glances of uncertainty, the men followed.

After only a few dozen more paces, the passage turned sharply and opened into a large and beautiful cavern. The four of them arrived at the entranceway at virtually the same time, and at that instant a woman's voice boomed out.

"Welcome, strangers!" The speaker was standing in the center of the oval place, arms spread wide in greeting. "Since my little tricks failed to dissuade you, I have no choice but to surrender myself to your mercies, trusting that you will not slay or abuse me!"

This statement seemed preposterous to Gord, for the glowing, blue horror which towered before them appeared capable of rending the huge cave bear to bits. Further, he could not understand why this gruesome monster spoke with a female voice through its lipless, fanged mouth. Perhaps this was an irony of condition, for never before had he seen anything so foully evil, ugly, and terrible. The dulcet voice made the horror of this demon more awful still.

"May I come from this place of safety, sirs?" it continued. "Have I your pledge that you will not hurt me?"

"Stay where you stand, woman!" Curley Greenleaf ordered. "If you move from that little isle in your lagoon, we will surely slay you, even naked and helpless as you appear." Gord, feeling himself becoming confused, nudged the druid at this point, but Greenleaf ignored the contact and went on.

"We seek a cataboligne, a demon of fearsome power. If you are not such, prove it by telling us where this fiend lurks, and we might spare you."

"Aren't you cold?" interjected the barbarian as he stared at the figure in the center of the cavern.

Now Gord's head was swimming. Woman? Naked and helpless? Lagoon? Cold? What were his companions talking about? The scaled and wrinkled demon that leered from huge, horizontal-pupiled eyes at bear and men was certainly naked of clothing. But it was most certainly not female, as far as

human standards went, and from where Gord stood, the thing seemed comfortable as its splayed, clawed feet rested on the rock of the cavern's hard surface—a floor that displayed not the slightest trace of water, but which was strewn with a welter of bones, skulls, and other undefinable litter.

Gord tentatively put his free hand on Greenleaf's shoulder as if to shake the druid awake from a dream. "Have you gone daft?" he asked, but before he could speak further, the demon interrupted him, and both of his fellow adventurers had their attention riveted on the figure in front of them.

"Oh, yes!" said the thing in the cavern sweetly. "I will tell you where that nasty catabolignе is! It hurts me, and I hate its evil. I will gladly show you the way to its lair, a place not too far from here… unless brave men fear to have a naked and defenseless woman accompany them." With that, the demon took a small step toward the four.

Yurgh growled softly, but he did not seem frightened and did not move forward to meet the thing. Curley and Chert seemed likewise unafraid—but Gord was horrified by the approach of the catabolignе!

As he fought to retain control of his reason in the face of his terror, Gord noticed for the first time that the sword in his hand seemed to be pulsing, and in an eye-blink he put everything together in his mind: The demon had somehow placed a glamour upon his companions, a magic that made them think they were facing an unclothed woman of harmless aspect. But the power of Gord's weapon overcame the dweomer of the demon for him and enabled him to see the creature for what it really was!

Without dwelling further on the matter, Gord rapped the druid sharply on the left arm, using the flat of his blade. "Clear your brain, man!" he shouted, no longer tentative in the least. "The godsdamned demon comes for us!"

The catabolignе had been fixing its gaze on the bear, taking small, cautious steps toward it with the evident intention of finishing the giant ursine before going after the men. But then the earless, egg-shaped head jerked up at the sound of Gord's desperate warning, and the terrible eyes locked on the young thief. An unspeakable fear filled Gord, and the wash of it weakened his muscles and made his knees knock together. He almost dropped his sword—but as his fingers loosened, the hilt somehow stuck fast in his hand. The demon continued to stare at Gord, but in the space of two or three seconds the feeling of terror passed and he felt himself able to move again.

"At the bastard thing, for your lives!" he shouted, and with that cry he darted a couple of steps forward, ready to do battle.

The effect of Gord's actions freed the others from the illusion they had been beholding, as evidenced by their immediate reactions. Yurgh roared with ear-splitting ferocity, stood erect, and shuffled forward on his back legs. The druid swung a hammer free from his left wrist where it had been thonged, loosed it toward the demon in a single, whirling motion, and then held his ground near the chamber entrance. The barbarian stepped up to close quarters with the terrible foe, battle-axe held ready to strike.

All of the demon's intended victims were now bent on destroying the thing, but the monster was not unprepared for this turn of events. Distracted for a split-second by the bear's roar, the cataboligne failed to avoid the thrown warhammer—but even as it was struck on the body by the whirling weapon, the demon was acting to again put its attackers at a disadvantage. The blue radiance it gave off became a brief, eye-searing blue flash—and then all light was gone, including that from the lodestone on Chert's helmet. The cavern was plunged into total darkness.

"Come close, demon dog, and feel Brool!" The cry came from Chert, standing off to Gord's right between the thief and the bear. Although he was blinded, a low humming sound indicated that the barbarian was swinging his great battle-axe to and fro before him.

The demon's response was a hideous, chilling laughter, a sound like a dozen insane children in demented glee.

Gord found that he could see clearly despite the blackness, although colors were not as they should have been. It took a moment for his brain to learn how to deal with things—and by then it was almost too late!

"To your right, Chert!" screamed Gord. "The thing is moving between you and Yurgh!" He saw Chert turn in response to his warning, just as the demon pivoted to face Gord, glaring banefully, and pointed at him with a scaled, claw-fingered hand. Instinctively, Gord took evasive acrobatic action, not a second too soon. Gray light issued from the cataboligne's eyes, first striking the place where he had been and then following the path of his leap and roll. Before he could rise from his half-prone position, Gord felt the strange radiance touch him. A terrible wave of pain passed through him; then his muscles were convulsed by a vicious cramping, and he couldn't move. Paralyzed, Gord could only watch what transpired next.

As the demon was spending its power on Gord, the druid had been at work. Thanks to a spell guided by Greenleaf's elven eyesight, the cataboligne was now limned with a pale radiance, and both barbarian and bear could see its form outlined in pale green phosphorescence. Chert was closer and struck immediately.

"Brool bites!" he bellowed, leaping forward and burying his axe in the demon's scaly thigh. The big barbarian was dwarfed by the towering cataboligne, but the blow caused the demon to shriek in pain. As Chert drew back the blade, the demon sent a stream of ugly, blue darts from its fingers. These missiles struck the barbarian, and he reeled backward.

What the demon intended next was uncertain, for a snarling form struck it in fury, and cataboligne and cave bear were locked in a tearing, clawing, biting, roaring melee. The bear's rush actually overbore the demon, and the two combatants rolled and fought locked together thus. Chert, still staggering from the effects of the strike he had absorbed, followed their path as they thrashed about the chamber, being careful not to be crushed beneath these titanic opponents but staying ready to strike with his axe again when he could get a clear target.

"Move!"

That word came from Greenleaf, who shouted in Gord's ear at the same instant that the thief's muscles came back to life. He had not felt the druid's initial touch, but now the healing magic had worked, and he could fend for himself again!

"Thank you," was all he could get out before the druid dashed off to go to the barbarian's side. Gord stood and moved carefully to gain a position where he could attack without fear of interfering with his friends. Within a few steps, the last vestiges of stiffness left his limbs, and he felt as fit as he had before.

Gord could see that Curley Greenleaf was touching Chert, just as he had ministered to Gord moments earlier. At that moment the bear gave an awful roar, shuddered, and lay still. The scaly demon stood up, pulling free from the embrace of the mortally wounded Yurgh. The cataboligne was torn by tooth and claw in several places, and yellow-green ichor dripped from its wounds. Throwing its head back in triumph, the cataboligne howled a cry of victory. Filled with bloodlust, it ignored the men and reached down to break and crush the bear. Just then, Chert struck again.

The first swing of his humming axe only grazed the demon's right arm that was reaching for Yurgh's motionless body. But the barbarian recovered quickly, and the weapon's backswing took the demon on its other arm, putting a deep gash in it. The demon bellowed again, but this time its shout was not triumphant.

"Come on, you blue bugger, fight me!" Chert challenged.

The demon accepted, spinning with catlike speed and swiping its uninjured arm in a clawed blow which tore into the barbarian's chest, unbalancing him and allowing the towering monster to use its wounded arm to strike and hold Chert. The demon's long claws sank into his flesh, but the barbarian was not finished. He worked his right arm free and struck again.

"Brool!" he managed to cry, as the battle-axe again impacted on the demon's severely wounded left arm. This time the blade bit true, and the limb was severed from the monster's body. With a shriek, the cataboligne leapt off and away from Chert, grabbed up its lost arm, and held it up against the place from which it had been severed. As Gord watched with a mixture of fascination and horror, the demon's sickening ichor flooded over and into the twitching arm, and a blurring seemed to occur around the wound. The demon was reattaching its lost limb!

Gord was moving up to stab the monster while its attention was elsewhere, but before he was close enough to do so, a sheet of roaring flame sprang up between him and the demon. It was said that such creatures revel in fire, but evidently this one didn't. The thing roared in anger when the flames appeared, but continued to concentrate on repairing its arm.

At first the fire seemed hesitant to approach the demon's body, almost as if something prevented it from coming near. The crackling fire danced in a ring encompassing the monster, and all the while it kept working on its arm. The flames went out for a second and then reappeared, this time in a blazing mass that enveloped the thing and threatened to consume it—but too late! Now whole again, the creature raised its arms and brought them down, and as they lowered, the flames dimmed and began to die. Scorched and smoking, the demon strode forward away from the last licking tongues of fire. As the last of the flames died, so did the greenish luminescence that had swathed the demon, again making the thing invisible to those without special sight.

Not hampered by the lack of light, Greenleaf advanced toward the monster, stopping less than a spear's length away and adopting a defiant

stance. Chert was off to one side, back on his feet but obviously still trying to recover from the onslaught he had suffered, and now once more left in the dark.

Thanks to his sword, of course, Gord could still see. As demon and druid confronted each other, Gord circled stealthily around on the side opposite Chert until he was behind the creature's field of vision. He continued to creep as the monster spoke.

"Little druid, your useless spells are nothing to me. I would have used my powers to destroy all of you long before this, but I enjoy breaking such miserable creatures as you with my bare hands!" The demon was speaking softly, with malign persuasiveness, but Greenleaf stood immobile in front of the thing, spear held in both hands before him, refusing to flinch or show fear.

"Humans beg so wonderfully, and shriek and cry when I slowly pull and break them…. What fun, what joy!" the cataboligne continued to purr evilly. One blue, clawed hand reached out slowly in Greenleaf's direction. "Perhaps I will make you into a replacement for my last servant, the one you thoughtlessly destroyed above, when I finally go free from this prison to—"

"Shitmouth!" Greenleaf shouted as he stabbed his spear into the demon's slowly reaching hand. "You think I am taken with your foul enchantments of voice? Take that!" And so saying, the druid struck again, this time tearing the other grabbing hand with the keen spearhead.

By this time, Gord had reached his destination behind the monster. Recoiling from the two painful spear attacks, the cataboligne backed full into Gord's own assault. Its lower back was unprotected and unprepared, and both shortsword and long dagger went home, driven in to their hilts by the young thief's muscles and the demon's own motion.

For a second, the monster continued backward, convulsed with the shock of the assault. Then it jerked forward. The dagger was yanked from the grip of Gord's left hand by the sudden move, but the sword held fast in his other hand, and a geyser of stinking ichor shot out as the enchanted blade tore free of the wound. Howling and yelling the foulest curses, the monster turned to lunge at its new tormentor.

"Now, Chert, at him!" said the druid in wrathful voice, as he cast a second spell to renew the glowing on and around the demon.

The first thing Chert saw was the demon turned away from him with one clawed hand pointing upward—and Gord suspended in mid-air, several feet away from the claws and some thirty feet above the cavern floor. Without stopping to think about what he beheld, the wounded barbarian pounced forward and sunk his great axe into the monster's thigh once again. Curley Greenleaf followed with a spear-thrust into the demon's other leg a split-second later. The two blows hurt the creature seriously and broke its spell. Gord plummeted to the stone below. He managed to come down on his feet, tumbled to absorb most of the force of impact, rolled away, and came up shaken but not seriously harmed.

The demon was now terribly hurt, but it was not ready to break off and seek escape. Confined in this underground place for centuries, the monster was no longer sane—if any such thing can ever be said to have sanity. Its desire was to inflict pain and death now. This malign wish had pervaded the demon's existence, but never with such irrationality as now when it was itself suffering the pain it loved to wreak on its victims. Forgetting about its magical powers, despising flight, ignoring the knowledge that it was able to pass the door which formerly held it imprisoned, the catabolignе sought only to kill the humans challenging it, and to do so most hideously.

Even as its body toppled forward, crippled legs no longer able to support it, the demon grabbed for the barbarian and took Chert down beside it with a swipe of its claws. The other arm lashed out for Curley Greenleaf and scooped his body in close where the demon could maul the druid with its fangs.

The sight of his friends being bloodied drove Gord into a rage. He ran forward without reservation and began raining a furious series of cuts and stabs down upon the scaly back of the prone demon. Some of the blows glanced off the thick plates of horn that covered the catabolignе, and others were not serious wounds—mere scrapes and pricks to the mountain of malign substance receiving the blows. Nonetheless, over a period of time that could not have been nearly as long as it seemed, Gord's small sword wrought a terrible tattoo on the demon's hide. Bluish flesh parted in places, and filthy ichor spewed forth under the razor-sharp edge and needlelike point of the young adventurer's dripping blade.

"Die, you filthy bastard-thing! *Die! DIE!"* Gord shouted over and over as he struck and hacked the demon.

Then, after what seemed like an eternity, Gord heard another voice between his cries of outrage.

"You can stop, friend…. It is finished."

Gord stopped his thrashing and looked to the side, toward the sound of Chert's voice. The barbarian was kneeling, hands on thighs, breathing heavily.

Gord pulled back slowly and faced forward again, staring at the mess before his eyes. The cataboligne's whole upper torso was a welter of wounds, and the demon was unmoving, save for occasional convulsive twitchings of its dying nervous system. Gore-spattered and stinking, Gord stood alive over the body of the monstrous demon—alive!

He looked back at his companion. "We have won, Chert!" Gord said, almost not believing his own words. "We have slain the bastard! We're alive!"

"You and I are, Gord," said Chert. "But Curley is dead, and his great bear slain too. What a price we have paid for this victory…."

Chapter 31

"You count me out too soon," came a weak croak from the other side of the demon's form.

Chert rose to his feet and took a couple of steps in the direction of the voice as Gord came around the catabolignes body to look. Chert peered into the dimness, having trouble seeing in the faint glow shed by the rapidly fading luminescence from the expiring spell. Gord could see well, however, since the magical sword remained in his ichor-stained hand—and he beamed at the sight before his eyes.

"Greenleaf!" he cried. "Are you indestructible?" The rotund druid was lying several paces away from the demon, propped on one arm, blood dripping from his wounds, part of his face nearly torn off.

"Quickly, Chert! We must help Curley!" Gord said, taking the barbarian by the arm and leading him toward where the druid lay.

"How do you know where to go in this darkness?" asked Chert.

"My sword," said the thief. "So long as I keep hold of it, I can see."

"But I am blinded," said Chert. "You cannot bind Curley's wounds with one hand, and I cannot do it without eyes!"

"We must do something, man! He's bleeding to death!" Gord shouted in despair. "I'll tell you what I see, and guide you to perform the work—but hurry! Already he goes!" The druid had fallen back even as Gord spoke, lapsing into unconsciousness. In a few more minutes, Gord feared, he would certainly expire.

Chert worked his best, directed by Gord's eyes and voice. It was a clumsy and fumbling process, consuming more time than either of the dying druid's companions meant to take, but it was all they could do.

Finally, Chert finished. He had managed to close the torn cheek and staunch the flow of blood from that wound and the worst of the others covering his friend's body. Both young men were themselves wounded and bleeding, Chert worse than Gord, but both ignored their own pain and bleeding to save Greenleaf. Then, suddenly, Gord remembered something.

"He has healing salve!" Not bothering to waste further breath, Gord tore the pouch from the druid's belt with his free hand. Then, moving sword from right to left, he managed to get the jar out of the bag and held it tightly. "Use your hand to work the top open," he commanded the barbarian. After a bit of groping, Chert managed to get the thing open.

"Put a bit on your finger and then I'll guide it to a bleeding wound," he instructed his companion. "If this doesn't work, then it is all over for him."

Carefully, using his free hand, Gord used the barbarian's outstretched arm, hand, and finger as an instrument for applying the ointment. The stuff had an odd, pearlescent sheen to Gord's dweomered eyes, but this disappeared as the thick salve was spread on the torn face of the comatose druid. As the salve's brightness and color faded, the flesh upon which it was spread joined at the edges, closing cuts and gouges. In another moment, blood no longer flowed from the ghastly wound!

"It serves him well, Chert! Now we must have more for his other wounds!"

The process of groping and smearing continued until the small pot of ointment was utterly empty. The druid was still in critical shape, covered with small, untreated wounds and blood-smeared, but blood was no longer coursing from him, and Gord thought he might yet survive. The two young men sat back in the underground place, exhausted. Now they must wait.

Using some of their water, both men cleaned their own wounds as well as they could under the circumstances. They also drank some, to quench the thirst of battle and clear their mouths and throats of the horrid taste left by combat with the demon. Gord sat down close to Greenleaf, still clutching the sword so that he could keep a vigil for the unconscious druid. Chert stretched out beside Gord on the stone floor, intending to keep his friend company while he started to recuperate. But weakness and fatigue got the best of him, and shortly he began to snore. Gord was dozing lightly himself when, some time later, a welcome sound brought him alert.

"Gord! Gord!"

The thief came close to Greenleaf's head, for the druid could barely manage a whisper. "What is it, Curley, dear friend?" he said.

"Silence that blaster over there," the fellow managed to say with a bit of spirit. "He's keeping me awake!"

Gord was flabbergasted at this attempted humor, and for a moment lost track of what else Curley was saying.

"I said, hold me in a sitting position, you idiot!" the druid groused. "Seeing that you two have somehow brought me back from death's door, I have to do this quickly, or that bony bastard will get his fingers on me and pull me back inside again!"

Gord was afraid to move the druid, who was still not well off, but his demeanor left no choice but to comply. The druid managed to get a sprig of vegetation from inside his robe, and he muttered some chant under his breath as he waved the stuff slowly back and forth over his body. After three such passes, the druid relaxed.

"That's better, much better," he said in a stronger voice. "Many thanks to you, Gord. And now I must close my eyes." Gord started to protest, not understanding his meaning, but the druid reassured him. "I am all right, I tell you! Not well and whole, but I will live if you'll only allow me to sleep a bit, dammit. Why don't you imitate that great hulk over there," he concluded, "and allow me to do the same?"

With that, the fellow lay back and fell asleep almost instantly. Gord had nothing better to do, so he also allowed slumber to take him. How long he rested thus, chilled and aching on the cold stone of the cavern's floor, he knew not. He was roused by the sound of Greenleaf talking to Chert.

"Now sit there," the druid instructed the big adventurer, "and I'll see to sleeping beauty over there."

"I'm awake," Gord informed the approaching druid.

Curley, who appeared to have never been wounded, said, "I can see well enough, thank you, to detect your awakened state. How badly are you hurt?"

Gord allowed that he had felt better, but that besides the claw-wounds on his arm, there was nothing but scrapes and bruises troubling him.

"Can you move freely and well?" Greenleaf asked.

"Yes, and without much pain, save for the arm."

"The arm will have to wait, then, Gord," the druid told him. "Chert was sorely hurt by the demon, and how he managed to stay conscious and assist you in saving my life is a wonder for a bard's song. My work has brought him round to fair state, but if I can aid him yet further, we can leave this place to serve as the sepulcher of demon and bear—bless Yurgh's brave heart—and seek our prize."

This was most agreeable to Gord, and as soon as the druid had gone through his ritual of healing over the barbarian, the three went from the place. They were tattered, sore, and still stunk of foulness from the catabolignе, but they went with pride and gladness in their hearts. A demon was defeated and dead behind them, and somewhere within the maze before them was a great treasure.

With Gord and Curley taking turns leading Chert through the blackness, they made their way back to the grotto and picked up the torches they had seen there earlier. Then, in several hours of casual wandering, they investigated the whole place.

The central grotto had three exits, as they already knew. Each exit led to a curving passageway, and each of these in turn had three adits. The connecting corridors tied three such circular ways together, but the passages that did so were offset and asymmetrical, rather than being like the spokes of a wheel. They covered all the curves and corridors systematically, concluding with a second trip around the outer rim of the third wheel-shaped passageway, which took them back to the tunnel leading to the chamber where the cataboligne's corpse lay.

After going some distance farther, they came upon another tunnel that led them to a somewhat smaller cavern. The place contained no treasure, but there they found a deep, cold pool of water, and all three had a chance to bathe and clean themselves of the reeking remnants of their terrible encounter. Refreshed and feeling far better than they had in some time, the three adventurers moved on. Going on to their right, they passed the position where a third opening would have been, had such a thing been there. But the wall was unbroken, and they eventually came round to the area of the tomb of demon and bear again. Something was wrong—either they could not find the treasure, or else, as Gord speculated at this point, someone had added the relic to the tale of the cairn to enliven it.

"That is most unlikely," Curley stated flatly. "The tablet I translated said that there was a most powerful item here, and the whole place seems made to contain it. What madness caused the servants of this place to ward it with a demon, I can't say, or even hazard a guess at, but the dead bandits carried nothing forth, and their surviving fellows claimed nothing either—why else tell stories for your supper? If bandits fled demon, then demon guarded treasure. Thus," the druid reasoned, "we have missed its hiding place somehow."

"How?" Chert demanded in an impatient tone.

"He's right, Curley," Gord said. "If the story-teller said they saw wealth here, any treasure would have to be in plain sight, or else taken away… or hidden by the demon!"

Spirits lifted by this sudden inspiration, they returned to the demon's cavern—the only place they had not searched thoroughly—and looked it

over carefully, but besides the dead, there was nothing in sight. They rested a few minutes and pondered.

"The cataboligne used illusion," the druid said.

"Then must we assume that an illusion hides the relic?"

"No, not necessarily, Gord, but it is a good start."

"When I held my sword fast, the demon's spell affected me not," the young thief pointed out. "Yet I saw through no illusory cover to a treasure beyond as we searched this maze!"

"You weren't holding your sword," Chert informed his friend.

"I wasn't?… I wasn't!" Gord exclaimed in reply. He had grown so accustomed to having the sword in his grasp that he failed to immediately realize that he had sheathed the weapon and used normal sight in their explorations after the torches were acquired.

Gord felt foolish, but neither of the others blamed him for the oversight —after all, they had not thought of it either.

Greenleaf stood erect. "Let us do it all again, friends," he said, "and this time Gord will employ the dweomer vested in him by his blade to see if we have been duped."

The circuit seemed longer and more tedious than they recalled from their first passage, but they went round again, up and down passages, from core to outer circle. Finally, back at the spot where they thought a tunnel should have been, Gord's magical vision revealed to him that a loosely piled stack of blocks closed an opening in the wall.

"What do you two see here?" asked Gord, pointing to the place.

"Hewn rock wall," the druid said.

"The same—a stone wall," Chert agreed.

Gord tapped on the place with his knuckles. "Look again, and try to see what is really there. It is a passage blocked by stone slabs!"

The barbarian shook his head, then grinned. "I see it now, Gord!" he said, clapping his hand on his friend's shoulder.

Curley Greenleaf, despite closing and opening his eyes and shaking his head several times, could discern nothing. But this did not prevent him from lending a hand by feel alone, and as soon as enough of the stone was tumbled aside to allow entry, all three passed through, the druid remarking how soft the rock had become as he pushed his hand in front of him, still unable to believe what he was doing even though he realized that the stone was phantasmal.

There was a short passage hewn through the rock, and then it opened on a natural tunnel—which Curley, much to his relief, could see. This passageway, in turn, allowed them entry to a cave beyond. The entrance to the cave showed signs of being worked; stones had been wedged together to form a crude archway, which indicated both that the rocks in this area were not terribly strong and that someone apparently cared about keeping the tunnel from collapsing. The flickering light from the torch Chert carried showed the adventurers that the place was some thirty feet wide, but the other end of the oblong cave was hidden in darkness the feeble illumination of the torch could not pierce from where they stood.

"Hold that thing higher," Greenleaf commanded. Chert complied, and the circle of illumination spread forward a few feet, faintly showing broken stone and some other indistinct shapes on the floor ahead.

"What's there?" Gord asked, pointing toward something glittering.

They stepped a few paces ahead cautiously, then quickly recoiled from a hissing noise that rose up from the perimeter of the lighted area. There, confronting them, were fully a dozen pale adders, each as long as Chert was tall.

Both young adventurers prepared to defend themselves, for the reptiles were still hissing furiously and now advancing toward them. Curley Greenleaf stood still and began chanting some strange verse, the sound of which seemed to attract the snakes and make them even more aggressive. Several of them slithered toward the druid, intent on sinking their fangs into his flesh. Gord sliced the head from the one nearest the rotund fellow, shouting as he did so for the druid to retreat. Chert's axe caught two at once, chopping them both in half. Still, Curley remained motionless and kept chanting.

"…serpent vine… wood entwine… over scale… bark prevail!"

The druid ended his incantation on a rising shout and waved his hands before him, scattering bits of mistletoe leaf as he did so. Gord and Chert stared at the result in amazement. Where before there had been angry adders, now only twisted sticks remained—lengths of wood that bore an uncanny resemblance to the vipers.

Curley Greenleaf beamed with professional pride as the weapon-wielders stood speechless. "A little something special, my lads!" he beamed. "Most can make snakes of sticks, but it is rare indeed to have the reverse on the tip of the tongue. Those billets will serve well as torchwood, too…."

Curley's self-congratulation was halted by a great slithering sound followed by a hissing so loud it seemed as if the whole cave were filled with snakes—and that was not far from the truth! There came from the darkness more slithering sounds of mammoth scale on stone, and then the trio was confronted with the largest serpent any of them had ever seen. Mother had returned, and she was not happy to find her young so roughly handled.

"Now, Curley! Let's see the trick again, and quickly!"

"We fight or flee, lads," the druid said as he pulled out his spear and backed slowly toward the entrance. "I can do that spell but once!"

Weapons at the ready, the other two moved slowly in the same direction, willing to give the angry snake its run of the cave. If they could keep it at bay by retreating slowly and then draw it into the narrow passage, they would have the advantage. In such a confined space, the serpent would not be able to coil and thus strike from a distance, and they could close on it and cut it to pieces before its poisonous fangs did their work.

The adder was not so cooperative, however. It was coming forward in a coiling rush, determined to not drive off but rather devour the creatures who had dared enter its nest and destroy its offspring. Chert acted equally quickly, dropping both axe and torch and picking up a large rock off to his side.

"Eat some stone!" he shouted at the adder as he raised the missile over his head with both hands. Then he heaved the head-sized slab with all his strength, plunging it directly into the open mouth as the giant reptile lunged.

The missile snapped off a fang as it flew into the serpent's gaping maw. The snake recoiled, trying to spit the rock from its mouth and writhing from the pain of its impact upon both fang and mouth. Greenleaf jabbed at its darting head with his spear, while Gord sought desperately for some vantage point from where he could attack such a creature with effect. A small sword such as his was not likely to be effective against so huge a snake.

Chert's torch was guttering out on the floor, its flames dying and illumination dropping. The barbarian hurried to grab an; other stone missile and regain the torch before it was extinguished against the rock. This second chunk of stone was larger than the first, but he managed to hurl it with such power and aim that it flew as far as the other and again struck true. More of the fangs within the huge snake's mouth were broken.

Instinctive concerns of motherhood now gave way to another instinct—rage. The adder shook its head to clear the second stone, giving Chert the precious few seconds he needed to regain the torch and his axe. Then the snake struck back at its foe with blind fury. Its wedge-shaped head lashed forward with lightning speed, propelled by the massive power of a sixty-foot-long body as thick as the trunk of a hundred-year-old oak.

Chert darted backward and to the side just as the snake committed itself to the direction of its lunge. The deadly jaws snapped shut on thin air, and the serpent's massive head continued onward to smash into the stonework at the edge of the cave entrance.

No doubt hurt but undaunted and still enraged, the snake recoiled for a second strike as Gord and Curley scurried away from the tunnel they had sought to reach. Chert, his back to the wall near the tunnel, succeeded in baiting the creature to come after him again. This lunge had much the same result as the first; the injured reptile was slightly off the mark, and instead of hitting Chert it again drove its head into the wall near the entrance.

This time it was a glancing blow, and the force of the thrust was not entirely absorbed by contact with the wall. The adder's head ricocheted off the corner of the entranceway and into the narrow passage. Before it could withdraw its head, a rain of stone fell upon the snake. Weakened by the first smash, the rock gave way from the force of the serpent's second impact, and hundreds of pounds of rock crashed down. This was not fatal in itself, but the blows so hurt and infuriated the reptile that its thrashing efforts to withdraw the pinned head served to cause still greater collapse. Within a few more seconds, a small avalanche of rock tumbled down to completely trap the adder.

"Strike while it is held fast!" bellowed Chert, who was standing off to the side preparing to do just that.

"Get back!" the druid shouted—particularly to Chert—for the writhings and coilings of the serpent's enormous body were unbelievable.

All three hastened to save themselves from being crushed or battered by the lashing and twisting body. The feebly burning torch suddenly went out altogether, leaving Chert without guidance save for his ability to locate the sounds of clattering rock and the titanic thrashing of the trapped snake. Wisely, Chert dropped to the floor, and Gord could see the form of his big friend, prone and rolling across the cave floor. He watched until the barbarian's body came to a sudden halt against a side wall, some distance

from the entrance and also comfortably away from the thrashing body. So, Chert was safe, and it seemed that Curley was out of harm's way also, for the druid had crept into a low spot some distance from the passageway, and the huge body could not touch him in its flopping and whipping. Gord himself had been moving up into the cave, going in the direction of the adder's tail when the avalanche came, and he was presently in the most danger.

Gord stood flattened against the wall, doing his best to hide, to avoid being crushed by the contortions of the dying monster. He dared not move too far or too quickly, feeling himself overcome by an irrational fear that the snake's body could see him and would seek him out if he made himself evident. So, he stayed more or less where he was and endured, for what seemed like hours. At last the thing was still, and the cave quiet.

Gord and Curley joined up and walked across the cave to where Chert had sought refuge. The druid stood silently for a moment, and the place became dimly illuminated by the now-familiar phosphorescent green glow, this time coming from a portion of the dead reptile's tail.

"This is the best I can do for you, Chert," said Curley. "Gord and I will guide you if need be."

"I have eyes to see in this light," the barbarian replied as he clambered to his feet.

"What do we do now?" asked Gord somewhat plaintively. "The damned snake has closed off our escape from this place!" After the long hours of effort and tension, he suddenly -felt trapped and even doomed.

Curley would have none of such an attitude, however.

"First we gather up our prize," the druid said confidently. "Thereafter, all we need to do is find the exit that dead adder used to go hunting!"

That made perfect sense to both of his young companions, so, greatly heartened, they explored the small cave. It was a small place compared to the caverns they had previously explored in this place, but the space was long and had many side openings.

It took only a little time to locate what the druid sought. Within a recess near the middle of the main cave there was a chest of ancient origin, much discolored by verdigris. Gord was able to examine it and find where an incautious hand would be pierced by poisoned needles, and opening its primitive lock was mere child's play for him. Within the chest lay yet another coffer, one of gleaming wrought gold. They removed this from the

heavy chest with great care, with respect both for its contents and for possible traps laid to protect the prize.

"What think you, lad?" Greenleaf asked the young thief. "Can you open it safely?"

"I am not sure…. See the glyphs graven 'round its top? And there, by its catch, are yet more runes and sigils. I have seen such before—or writings similar, I should say—and they bode ill for any who violate them. It is my thought that we take this out of here unopened, and see what is therein in some place where we have better chance for safety."

"It is a good plan," Chert agreed. "This thing fairly reeks of some dweomer I like not."

"Then let's take it and find our route to light and clean air!" the druid said cheerily. "I am sick of this dark and gloomy place and long to see sun and trees again."

Chapter 32

After many wrong turns and retracing of steps, the three eventually managed to find their way to the surface. Greenleaf used his skills as a ranger to follow the route—or, rather, routes—the serpent had used. This in itself was not a difficult task, but locating egress to the outside was time-consuming because of the reptile's propensity to meander along many subterranean passages that also led to and from the cave. There was no way to tell whether a certain passage actually led up to ground level without trying it, and there were several to choose from; thus, it took a while for the hardy trio to make their escape.

As Gord moved briskly along the tunnel toward the exit, he wondered out loud what had prevented the demon from escaping by this same way. Curley Greenleaf suggested that some eldritch command from ancient days hedged the whole place so as to allow the catabolignе only one means of freedom; otherwise, the demon could surely have used its great powers to move itself by magical means to wherever it chose.

They came into the bright morning through a long, down-slanting tunnel of natural stone, stepping out upon a grassy slope that overlooked a mountain valley far below the cliff they stood on. It was evident from the position of the sun and the roll of the mountain peaks that they were on the western side of the place. Their route back was lost to them, and their horses too, and now their only recourse was to somehow manage to get westward and out of the mountains on foot. Fortunately, all three men were used to climbing, although Gord was by no means the outdoorsman that his comrades were.

Although Chert's bow had been broken during his final struggle with the demon, both Curley and the young thief still had slings, and finding good stones to use as missiles was no problem at all. They walked and climbed downward, heading in the direction of the setting sun, watered by mountain freshets and fed on small game brought down by slung stones. They had occasional encounters with things far more dangerous than a rabbit or a grouse, but by avoiding some or using spell and weapons to defeat the predatory purpose of others, the trio managed to gain the foothills several days later, with the golden coffer still safe and sound, hidden in a wrapping of old cloak and strapped on Chert's broad back.

They trudged farther west, seeking an inhabited place where they could refurbish and replenish their clothing and gear, find mounts, and seek what

they needed to safely examine what the coffer contained. When they came to a place where a large marsh spread northward as far as the horizon, the druid said that they were near the border between the lands of the city state of Greyhawk and the area controlled by Hardby—a wild territory, but at least one containing communities where they might locate their needs. Moving with great caution, and keeping sharp watch in darkness, the three adventurers managed to walk the next twenty leagues without incident. Early the next morning they saw signs of habitation on the horizon, and when they finally entered the village of Cepentar at midday, all three rejoiced. They had accomplished their quest, and now the matter was all but complete.

Gord provided the coinage for their needs, although not without some grumbling and dark looks. The barbarian and druid had no more than a few copper commons between them, so their companion had to tap his secret cache of orbs and platinum plates. Early on the following day, mounted on good steeds, newly clothed, rearmed, and rested, they rode along the highway that wended its way beside the Selintan River. This watercourse was the western outlet of the great Nyr Dyv, emptying that lake and running southward to pour its waters into Woolly Bay. This way was an artery of commerce, whether waterborne or otherwise, and the road was both well-used and frequently patrolled. Better still, it was dotted with hamlets, villages, and even towns, so that the one hundred and twenty mileposts they passed were not marks of a hard journey, but rather points along a rather comfortable ride between various inns, taverns, and hostels. No one questioned three such men, nor did any highwayman or bandit gang cross their path. They kept to themselves, and likewise were allowed to do this; such hardened and armed riders were let alone by outlaws, and were too few in number to concern soldiers bent on maintaining law and safety, for three apparent mercenaries were of no interest in a land where such were common.

The sight of Greyhawk's high wall and strong towers brought a flood of memories to Gord's mind. How long since had he left this city, bound for fortune and adventure? Only about eight years of real time, he reckoned… but eight years that seemed to hold a lifetime worth of joy, sadness, fear, and all the experiences between those extremes.

Would the city have changed much? He doubted it. Was his old friend, San, happily wed? Perhaps a ranking thief of the Guild by now? What of

the rebellious Teline and Sunray? Gone, he supposed, either to another place or to whatever lay beyond death.

The word "death" brought to mind the Beggarmaster's bones and a heavy box of plate iron, resting together in a dark cistern below the city. Gord had originally left the city to avoid the suspicious Guildmaster of Thieves, but he thought Arentol would neither recognize him after all these years, changed as Gord was, nor have any particular interest in him. Whether he would even be remembered at all was as much a question as whether or not he cared about such long-past matters of little real import.

What finally struck Gord was that other than during his short episode as a student—a period of time all too brief, it seemed in retrospect—he had never really had a home in Greyhawk. The city had merely been a place where he housed himself, or rather was forced to live, in his miserable youth. Did he hate this metropolis? Or did he love it? Perhaps he was indifferent to it entirely. He would soon discover which, Gord suspected, when he was once again within its walls.

Even if the city had not changed much, Gord knew that he had. Possibly it would mean something entirely different to him, with his perspective altered by years and travel… and much, much more. With the image of Evaleigh's silvery hair and violet eyes playing across his mind, Gord passed through the massive Southgate and into Greyhawk….

"What is your rede, priest?" asked Curley, trying to keep the anxiety he felt out of his voice.

"It is confused, druid…. But not evil, I think," the robed cleric replied with some uncertainty.

"And you, magician? What can you tell us?"

The dun-clad magic-user scratched and tugged at his long, scraggly beard before saying hesitantly, "The stuff writ upon the lid of yon coffer is potent, but it is done in runes so ancient I cannot be sure…. Yet I find no fell warding there, no curse, no sigil bringing some dweomer of ill.

"There is a magical aura, certainly, one of the strong sort, which I am prevented from reading by its own might. Beyond this, I am powerless to assist."

Gord, in an exercise he had become accustomed to of late, counted out gold into one outstretched palm, platinum lozenges into the other waiting hand. The cleric and the magician went their separate ways, departing

happily, for they had been quite richly rewarded for their somewhat questionable answers.

"This had better be some treasure indeed!" the young thief said meaningfully to his comrades. "The sums I have had to fork over to suit you and prepare for the discovery of this chest's contents are easily equal to the value of this antique coffer itself. If it holds aught of value, you two are out of luck, for I claim the box itself as repayment of expense!"

"Oh, of course, Gord," the rotund druid said with a casual wave of his hand. "I am sure I can speak for Chert too when I say that it is nothing to us… a trantlum justly yours for the gold you have spent to complete our quest."

The massive barbarian frowned at the druid's easy manner in giving so expensive an object to repay the costs that Gord had had to stand, but he did not contradict his friend. Perhaps he felt that Gord should turn some profit for his funding of this project, but it did seem excessive, and Gord looked entirely too pleased with Greenleaf's acquiescence to his claim on the coffer.

"What need for all this talk?" Chert said impatiently. "If we are ever going to open the thing, let us get to it now! No amount of pondering serves further. Spell-binders have been of scant help, and it is time for direct action. If you two are hesitant, I shall brave the unknown and get to the heart of it by going within!" So saying, he walked purposefully toward the small table upon which the gold box rested.

"Wait!" said Curley quickly. "I must bar the door so we do not have unwanted intrusion by some chambermaid or servant. Then we shall all have a hand in unlocking the coffer and lifting its lid."

Gord knew they had done right in not hastily forcing the box open when they discovered it; caution is always preferable to impulse in such circumstances. Still, it was hard for him not to feel a bit foolish and disappointed—and he supposed the others must feel much the same—when the adventurers finally realized, by judicious application of prying dagger-tip and strong barbarian fingers, that the coffer came open fairly easily and without adverse incident. Apparently the trap on the larger chest that Gord disarmed had been the only real protection on the treasure, save for a stubborn lock or two.

When the coffer of wrought gold was opened, another container of thin, age-darkened silver was revealed nestled within it. This also proved to be

fairly easy to breach, and when it too was opened, the druid examined its contents visually for a couple of moments. Then he gingerly took out the extensive array of gems that all but filled the box and arrayed them on a blanket.

"Here," Curley Greenleaf said, placing down a huge sphere of uncut yellow corundum, "is the great globe of our sun. This emerald orb here is Oerth, I think; that opal represents Luna, and the star-sapphire of smaller size stands for the blue disk of Celene," he continued, placing each piece in its correct relative position.

"These various stones are the spheres which accompany our world in its circuit of the sun…. These round diamonds are stars, and the little black opals the various moons and other celestial bodies whirling and spinning their pathways through the system," he concluded, not bothering to specifically place each of the smaller pieces. "What such imitations were used for is lost to us now, lads, but they represent a fortune to us all!"

"What of this?" Gord said, pointing to but not touching a strange object still within the box. The thing was a mesh of twisted wire, made of an unknown metal that shone with a bluish-silvery sheen. Held fast within the roughly spherical mass of wire was an oddly formed and strangely convoluted piece of something that seemed neither natural nor made by human hand.

Chert began to peer closely at it, likewise avoiding actual touch. "The thing inside seems to absorb light, whatever it is, and looking close at it makes my eyes ache and my mind feel wrenched and turned as the shape itself."

"Stop looking so!" the druid commanded, hastily pushing the barbarian away from his close scrutiny of the object. "Obviously, this is the relic we sought, which, even considering the value of all these gems, is the real treasure here. It has unknown powers, force unguessable. Leave it for those who are more able to understand and contend with such things."

"Then what are we to do?" queried Gord. "Is it to remain forever an enigma to us?"

"No, no, my good friends," Greenleaf said as he tucked the weird thing into a small bag of heavy silk, embroidered with the signs of potency to druids. "You shall know of what it is, and be paid handsomely too for its recovery, but this is work I alone must accomplish."

Now it was Gord's turn to glower suspiciously at the druid, but the young thief's unease at Curley's statement was not shared by Chert.

"What will you do, then?" the hulking barbarian asked mildly.

Curley Greenleaf had noticed Gord's suspicion, so he chose his words so as to reassure the thief and explain his intentions to them both. "I plan to depart Greyhawk this very day. Once in the countryside, I shall use my powers to travel in other forms, or through the good trees hereabouts, to return to the Celadon and the Archdruid there. He will undoubtedly wish to involve even more powerful ones of our order in this, perhaps even the Great Grand Druid himself—who knows?

"All of this will require some time… weeks, perhaps months. As soon as possible, I shall send word to you both, and whenever I can, I shall return personally to you both the knowledge gained and the rewards you so justly have coming." Here the druid paused and turned, looking down upon the many gemstones that had been with the true prize.

"Of these baubles, I have no need," he said. "Gord, if you will give me a few more coins, I shall have sufficient money to see me through to the forest's precincts where such stuff is un-needed. You and Chert, meanwhile, will certainly find some use for the price these jewels will fetch here in Greyhawk. May I divide them in equal shares for you?"

Readily agreeing to such a pleasant prospect, the two young adventurers watched their husky associate carefully examine and separate the many-colored array into two smaller piles—diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and so forth, even a large jacinth that Curley explained must represent the planet of Rao, greatest of the celestial spheres in the family to which Oerth belonged.

Happy and satisfied, the little thief and the big barbarian saw their comrade off, wishing him speed and safety on his journey and saying that they would be looking forward to his return in the days ahead. The druid was not far away before the two eager adventurers were heading for the gem market in the High Quarter of the city, bent on extracting every orb of good yellow gold they could in exchange for the precious stones secured in their purses.

Both were whistling and laughing, happy indeed, as they entered the first of the many shops that traded in precious metal, gemstones, and jewelry meant to please the nobles and rich folk of the great city of Greyhawk.

Chapter 33

A hunchbacked, old beggar, clutching some sort of prize close to his body, picked a colorful path through the ordure and garbage that littered the narrow lane twisting its way through Old City, leading the ragged man out of the far slums district toward the one that sheltered his fellows.

A close inspection would reveal that he cradled an ordinary-looking, rectangular box—perhaps made of some unusual and old wood, but dirty and dry with age and neglect, and cracked and battered too. Perhaps the decrepit thing would fetch a few lowly bronze coins somewhere, and zees were certainly a fortune to a beggar such as this.

He shuffled along, trying to remain inconspicuous with his meager treasure. Then the stooped figure suddenly raised his head, for shadows had fallen across his path.

"No beggar passes without paying tribute, crookback!"

The little old man quivered and peered with watery eyes at the gang of ruffians who stood grinning at his fright. He clutched the box more tightly and shuffled backward. "I have nothing you want! I am old and poor, a diseased beggar—don't touch me!"

"Old and a beggar, you are…. And a lying old fart, too!" the biggest of the gang said menacingly as he stepped toward the little fellow. "Hand us that object that you prize so, and I might forget your bullshit. After all, I hear it's good luck to rub a hump such as yours, and just seeing you has brought me and my boys some luck already!"

The handful of men who composed the rest of the gang of ruffians laughed loudly at that, for they knew that their spokesman was about to take the wooden container from the dirty old tramp and then thump his back until he went howling off. That was the way of the slums—the stronger preying upon the weaker. If there was little to be taken, that was as it was. Their band was the law in this small area, and all who dared enter, save men of the Watch or those who could afford armed escort, had to accept their exaction. It had been thus for years now, and only the foolish, stupid, or insane challenged the gang's right.

"Give me that!" the broken-toothed leader shouted as he tried to grab the box from the hunchback's grasp. The old man was unusually quick and agile for one so deformed, and he managed to step smartly back and avoid the attempted purloining of his paltry treasure.

"Stay away! Leave me alone! If you don't, you'll regret it," the beggar said in a voice as cracked and ancient as the wood he held so dear.

This infuriated the ruffian and convulsed his associates with laughter. The onlookers laughed and exhorted the old beggar to show his adversary a thing or two, while the big gangster made further futile attempts to grab either the dirty old man or what he held on to.

"You've asked for it, dumbshit, an' now I'm gonna give it to you good!" As he spat these words at the hunchback who had managed to elude his efforts, the burly ruffian whipped a wicked-bladed knife from his shabby jerkin. "I'm gonna carve that hump right offen your back, an' maybe eat it too! Nobody talks to the leader of the Headsmen like that!"

The bully started forward but then suddenly stopped and stared in amazement. The old man had thrown off his tattered hood and short cape. His hump was gone, a part of the discarded garment, and his appearance had changed too. The aged and shaking beggar had suddenly transformed himself into a straight young man, smallish but tough and capable-looking, despite the rags of clothing that remained on his frame. Gone too was the frightened demeanor, to be replaced by a hard voice, determined face, and spread-legged stance, elbows held wide and hands on hips.

"And I warned you, too! Now what is it to be, Snaggle?" The bigger man paused in his advance to gape in astonishment at the result of the transformation. Recognition slowly dawned across his stupid countenance, and his coarse features lifted in a cruel grin. "I'll be dipped in boiling batshit! It's our old playmate Gord the Gutless!" He turned to leer at his friends for their benefit, adding as he turned back, "You come back to piss your pants for us all?…"

Snaggle bit off the rest of what he had to say as he beheld the long, glittering dagger in Gord's hand and the deadly look in his eyes. Maybe, thought the cowardly ruffian, this was someone to be handled by the whole gang.

"C'mon, boys, let's get this runt!" he called to his comrades without looking back at them.

His fellows began to move forward slowly. This was an unexpected development, and one that they were uncertain about. It was all well and good to bully and beat the helpless, or even brawl with someone who tried to put up a fight with fists, but the man who defied their leader looked quite

ready to kill one and all, and might be able to accomplish such work too, judging by the hard eyes and ready weapon he displayed.

"What's the matter, you bag of guts? Can't the leader of the Headsmen handle one smaller man by himself? How can you need help with me? I'm just a gutless pisspants, aren't I?"

The others stopped and murmured agreement among themselves that there was merit to the words Gord spoke. Snaggle was, after all, the toughest of their gang, and their leader. If there was a fight here, it was his alone. They would watch and see….

"All right by me, you little asshole," Snaggle said without conviction. Gripping his knife, he came toward Gord alone.

"I recall how you took my little, broken knife from me years ago, Snaggle. Do you think you can manage to get this blade as easily?" Gord taunted, and then he danced back from the lunging rush of the big ruffian, laughing as he did so.

Gord drew the match out as long as he could, careful not to let himself be wounded and to inflict only superficial, painful jabs and small cuts upon the stupid man who vainly sought to come to grips with his elusive opponent. Of course, the stupid ruffian was no match for one so skilled as Gord, and the other members of the big fellow's pitiful gang were soon quite glad they had not entered this fight. Gord was an adversary capable of taking the whole group on in an encounter such as this, and leaving them all leaking their lives out onto the dirty cobblestones thereafter.

With athletic grace, Gord leaped and tumbled rings around the confused and dismayed Snaggle, playing with him, goading him into blind charges and clumsy assaults that always ended with Gord elsewhere and Snaggle bleeding from yet another small wound.

Panting, trembling, fearful now, the bigger man tried another tactic. "You win, Gord! I quit!" he called to the smiling, flint-eyed fellow who faced him. "You've gotten to be pretty good, ol' pal, so's I guess you pass the test —right, guys? You can be a member of our bunch if you wa—"

In a flash, the knife Snaggle had held before himself was gone, and numbness shot from his fingers up his arm. Gord had kicked the blade away with blinding speed, instantly closed to within a foot of the big leader, and lashed out expertly with his own blade.

Snaggle stared down at his belly, gone suddenly cold and painful. The jerkin he wore was cut away, the dirty skin beneath it revealed. A thin line

of red traced the path the dagger point had taken across his hairy, bulging belly to where it now rested in his navel. He looked along the weapon's steely length to the corded hand that grasped it, then up along the arm to the eyes of the man before him. Snaggle saw the threat of death in those eyes.

"No, no, no, no… please don't kill me…" Snaggle whined, and with that he lost whatever remained of his valor and fainted dead away.

Satisfied at last, Gord casually stooped and tore off part of the slashed and stained jerkin. As he wiped his dagger clean on the strip of cloth, he looked around and studied the stupefied members of the ruffian band. They looked quickly away from his gaze, not wishing him to think a returned stare meant a challenge. They had seen all they ever needed to see of him.

"I am doing Snaggle a favor, and all of you stupid jerks one as well. I'm not going to kill him, or you… this time! But if I ever happen to run into any of you again, you can bet your lives the favor won't be given a second time." He idly toed the unconscious Snaggle with his booted foot. "Your big, tough leader seems to have soiled himself—both ways, too, from the stink of it. Drag shitpants, here, away with you when you run along—and, boys, I'd do that right *now* if I were you!"

With cautious haste, the gang complied, and the last Gord saw of them they were going as fast as they could manage, hauling their still-unconscious leader by his arms, his legs scraping and bouncing along the rough cobbles as they hastened into a narrow alleyway and out of sight.

"That was not exactly revenge," the grinning young thief thought to himself as he put his disguise back on and headed away from the slums. "It was more like justice." He had balanced things, wiped out an old humiliation, and at last freed himself from whatever vague stigma from his former existence had plagued him over the years.

Now there was nothing left undone, nothing more to prove, no more of the old—except this cherished possession, the box that old Leena had once told him was somehow tied to the mystery of Gord's parentage. He had found it easily, right where he had seen Leena bury it years ago, close to where the old lean-to of his childhood had stood.

He didn't know exactly what he would do with, or about, the box—but that was a matter for later. Now he had a new life to build. All of Greyhawk lay before him, waiting for him to familiarize and refamiliarize himself with—from an exhilarating new perspective! Equipped with the vast riches,

knowledge, and skills gained in his broad wanderings, Gord knew that Greyhawk was now his, and he had some interesting times in store.

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